

OHCHR launches its 2014 Annual Report

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Al Hussein referred to successes in terms of civil society space, including the Kyrgyz parliament's rejection of two draft laws that would have reduced civil society space; the adoption of a law promoting and protecting human rights defenders in Côte d'Ivoire; the amendment of the Peaceful Assembly and Peaceful Procession Law in Myanmar, resulting in a reduction of prison sentences related to 'unauthorised demonstrations'; a decrease of reported human rights violations related to restrictions on public freedoms in Uganda; an increase in the authorities' awareness of their duties under the law of peaceful demonstration in Cambodia; the strengthening of the investigative capacity of the National Human Rights Institution in Guatemala; and the adoption of a four year strategic plan for the National Human Rights Commission in Niger.

The High Commissioner noted that these successes were achieved despite the OHCHR's reduced budget and an 'unremitting shortage of funds'.

Prompted by questions from the floor, the High Commissioner expressed his concern for the on-going humanitarian crisis Azerbaijan and the 'alarming' trend of arrests and detention of activists and journalists. He also echoed comments by Human Rights Watch that the European games (from June 12-28) provide an opportunity to exert pressure on the government as the global spotlight will fall on Azerbaijan during this time.

The High Commissioner also commented on the deteriorating situation in Burundi. In recent months Burundi has seen waves of arrests and assaults against human rights defenders, journalists and peaceful protesters, as well as a breakdown in the rule of law and a failure to respect the Constitution. The High Commissioner noted that the violations in Burundi are particularly troubling as they put the whole Great Lakes region in jeopardy - a tragic development after ten years of comparative peace and stability. A representative from Civicus echoed the High Commissioners concerns from the floor, commenting that colleagues in Burundi currently fear for their lives.

Amnesty International raised concerns about the negative impact counter-terrorism restrictions have had on human rights. The High Commissioner supported this concern, stating that the freedom of democratic space should be guaranteed, at the very least by the Global North, who have a long tradition in this area. He went on to say that the surest antidote to extremism is a vibrant and open civil society space where everyone has a place. 'Restrictions', he concluded, 'give a victory to extremists that the extremists themselves could never achieve'. His comments follow a recent wave of proposed counter-terrorism measures which would restrict free speech, including in Australia and the United Kingdom. The recent resolution headed by Egypt and adopted at the 28th session of the Human Rights Council adds to this concern. The resolution called on States to strengthen national laws and measures to criminalise and to counter terrorism, without any recognition that such laws and measures must be in conformity with international human rights law.

The International lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and intersex association applauded the High Commissioners' highly successful Free and Equal campaign and enquired about the year ahead. In response the High Commissioner praised Ireland for its recent legalisation of same-sex marriage. He then noted that while some countries have dramatically transformed their attitudes in recent years and some remain closed to LGBT rights, a significant number of States in the 'middle' appear to be moving, or about to move, in the right direction. In referring to the year ahead, the High Commissioner commented that 'we will intensify our activities in relation to them'.

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