

UN Committee on NGOs: Human rights organisation gains accreditation but reform needed to safeguard NGO participation at UN

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(New York) - A human rights organisation working for the release of prisoners of conscience, [Freedom Now](#), has finally been granted consultative status with the UN by the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), reversing 5 years of deferral of their application by the ECOSOC NGO Committee. Consultative status is required for an NGO to be able to attend and participate in UN meetings.

Addressing ECOSOC, US Ambassador to the UN Samantha Power called the US led-resolution to push through their accreditation, a bid 'to put an end to the inexcusable attempt to deny Freedom Now's official NGO status'. The resolution to accredit Freedom Now, co-sponsored by Albania, Australia, Estonia, France, Germany, Japan, Switzerland, the United Kingdom and Uruguay, passed by 29 votes to 9, with 11 abstentions.

Reflecting on the outcome, Freedom Now Executive Director Maran Turner said, 'We intend to use this status to improve attention and global efforts to address human rights violations and arbitrary detention.'

Freedom Now applied for UN consultative status in May 2009, and received over 60 questions from States that are members of the NGO Committee in the following five years, most particularly from China, Russia, Cuba, Venezuela, Iran, Sudan, Pakistan and South Africa. It was yet another decision by the NGO Committee last month to again defer the Freedom Now application that prompted the US initiative to overturn that decision in the Committee's parent body, ECOSOC.

'We are delighted that Freedom Now has at last been granted accreditation and will now be able to contribute to the UN more fully and directly,' said Eleanor Openshaw of ISHR, which advises and assists NGOs to obtain consultative status. 'Very frequently human rights organisations face multiple deferrals of their applications at the NGO Committee through perpetual questioning by States who ultimately fear the human rights accountability these organisations demand.'

Separately, an attempt led by Israel to overturn the NGO Committee's May decision to accredit the Palestinian Return Centre, was defeated in a vote in ECOSOC. The US, Germany and the UK had said that granting that organisation consultative status was premature, as there were still 'legitimate questions to be answered'.

Several States spoke at the ECOSOC meeting to express concerns about the NGO Committee. The EU emphasised the 'increasing deviations' by the NGO Committee from the principles that guide its work as expressed in ECOSOC resolution 1996/31, noting in particular that information requested by Committee members frequently went much further than what NGOs should be required to submit.

The EU also highlighted concern about the withdrawal of status from an NGO as a possible reprisal. At the May session of the NGO Committee, the African Technology Development Link and the African Technical Association had their '[roster status' withdrawn](#) in connection with statements they delivered at the UN Human Rights Council in March in a process that prompted criticism and concern amongst some States, and the NGO community.

'ISHR welcomes the EU statement about the risk of withdrawal of status being abused,' said ISHR's Eleanor Openshaw. 'We cannot accept a situation where NGOs are fearful of speaking out, under the threat that their accreditation could be at jeopardy.'

Chile, Mexico and Uruguay made a statement in which they noted that the perpetual questioning of NGOs by the Committee was tantamount to a denial of status. This is the third year that the three Latin American States have expressed their concern about the workings of the NGO Committee, in particular in regard to the Committee being used as a forum for carrying out reprisals against NGOs. The States called for greater transparency in the work of the Committee, recommending webcasting of Committee sessions. Avoiding a continuation of current practice was 'essential and could no longer be put off', said the States.

The three Latin American States ended their statement by referencing ISHR's recently published ['A Practical Guide to the UN Committee on NGOs'](#), which they called 'a specific and valuable contribution to facilitating NGO participation'.

Reform of the NGO Committee was at the heart of recent discussions held earlier this year by ISHR with the Australian Missions to the UN in Geneva and New York, at which the guide was launched. Several [ideas were put forward during those panel debates](#): from webcasting NGO Committee sessions, to introducing a 'trigger clause' limiting the number of questions NGO Committee members could ask of one organisation before the application passed to ECOSOC, to imposing a time limit within which the NGO Committee should make a decision on an application for accreditation.

'Freedom Now has been fortunate in being based in a country - the US - which is willing to invest the political capital in supporting an applicant for accreditation at ECOSOC. Unfortunately not all organisations are in that position,' said ISHR's Eleanor Openshaw. 'It is clear that [urgent reforms](#) are needed to ensure that the NGO Committee actually works to fulfil its mandate, and that pro-civil society States show a greater commitment to participation in the Committee.'

Reflecting upon Freedom Now's struggle for accreditation, Executive Director Maran Turner noted, 'Following this experience, we would like to bring forth greater discussion about reforming the NGO accreditation process and making the UN a more welcoming place for civil society'.

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