

United States: Welcome support for civil society at UN but too few allies

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(New York) - The United States has shown strong leadership and support for civil society space and the participation of non-governmental organisations at the United Nations, but had a disappointing lack of allies at the UN's Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), ISHR said today.

Of the 54 members of ECOSOC, only the US spoke out today in favour of the importance of civil society participation in the UN and to reject the politicised nature of ECOSOC's NGO Committee, which is responsible for assessing NGO applications to access the UN.

The ECOSOC Coordination and Management Committee met this morning to consider the draft decisions and report of its subsidiary body, the NGO Committee. These draft decisions included the [closure of the application of the Khmers Kampuchea- Krom Federation](#), an NGO denied to the right to speak in favour of its application by the NGO Committee in January 2016. It also included deferrals of applications for accreditation by human rights organisations, including the International Dalit Solidarity Network ([IDSN](#)) whose case has been before the Committee since 2008.

In a powerful statement, US Representative on the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations, Ambassador Mandelson noted the US was 'alarmed at the increasing trend for restricting civic space' across the world now mirrored within the UN.

For the US, she said, civil society are 'constructive critics' of States. Partnership with civil society was 'not just a tool but an ethos' grounded in the belief that the 'best outcomes' are reached through such engagement.

Ambassador Mendelson noted that the 'unacceptable restriction' placed on NGOs by the NGO Committee should be 'of grave concern to ECOSOC', not least given the importance of the role of civil society in pushing for the implementation of Agenda 2030 and the Sustainable Development Goals.

Some Committee members work to 'subvert the purpose of the Committee' and use their membership of the Committee to further restrict space for civil society, but 'attempted silencing won't work', she concluded. The NGO Committee's membership includes Azerbaijan, Burundi, China, Cuba, India, Iran, Nicaragua, Pakistan, Russia, South Africa, Sudan and Venezuela, among others. ISHR has repeatedly called for States that support a vibrant and independent civil society to prioritise seeking election to the Committee.

'It was deeply disappointing that no other State was prepared to speak out about the practice of the NGO Committee at ECOSOC,' said Eleanor Openshaw for ISHR.

'States need to acknowledge that the practice of the Committee is reflective of growing restrictions on civil society globally. Restrictions at the national level make access to the UN all the more important for civil society. States must be prepared to prioritise human rights interests and to publicly and unequivocally challenge any attempts to curb NGO access and participation'.

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