

High Commissioner | Put human rights defenders up front

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Making human rights a reality for all depends on the work of human rights defenders. Despite this, across the globe, the right to defend human rights is being systematically undermined. Promoting, protecting and advocating for the rights of defenders should be among the highest priorities of the new UN High Commissioner for Human Rights and her Office.



In a [briefing paper for the new UN High Commissioner for Human Rights](#), Michelle Bachelet, ISHR has set out ten concrete and practical ways in which the High Commissioner and her Office can contribute to protecting human rights defenders and promoting a safe and enabling environment for their work at the international and national-levels.

'We all want to enjoy freedom and dignity, and to live in communities that are fair and just in a world that is peaceful and sustainable. Human rights defenders advocate and organise to make this a reality. They work to ensure that every person has access to quality education, healthcare, a decent job, secure housing, and a healthy environment. They work to ensure that none of us are harassed, imprisoned, disappeared or even killed because of who we are, who we love, or what we say,' said ISHR Director Phil Lynch.

'Supporting and empowering these defenders - and protecting them against those governments, corporations and fundamentalists whose currency is prejudice, profit or privilege - should be the new High Commissioner's highest priority. She should consult closely with defenders, speak out and pursue accountability when they are attacked, push for laws and mechanisms to protect them at the national level, and ensure that the UN human rights system is safe, accessible and effective for them,' Lynch said.

The [ISHR briefing paper](#) complements a [broader civil society letter](#) - coordinated by ISHR in partnership with Human Rights Watch and supported by more than 750 civil society organisations from every corner of the world - which sets out a range of principles to help guide the High Commissioner in protecting rights holders, supporting defenders, ensuring access to justice for victims, and promoting accountability for perpetrators.

Recommendations for the High Commissioner to support human rights defenders

1. Be proactive in regularly consulting and working in partnership with human rights defenders and other independent civil society actors.
2. Make clear and regular statements on the essential role played by human rights defenders and the need to ensure they can work in a safe and enabling environment without fear or hindrance, acknowledging the protection needs of particular groups of defenders.
3. Speak out and demand accountability on cases of threats, attacks and reprisals against human rights defenders, including by calling for and supporting impartial investigations, prosecution of perpetrators, and effective remedies for victims.
4. Push and work with States to fulfil the commitments laid out in the UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders, including through repealing restrictive legislation and developing specific laws, policies and mechanisms to protect defenders.
5. Establish a comprehensive set of indicators to assess State fulfilment of human rights obligations related to human rights defenders, which could be used as an evidentiary basis for assessing compliance.
6. Build strategic alliances with States, civil society, academics, business enterprises and other actors with a shared interest in human rights, ensuring an enabling environment for civil society and respect for the rule of law.
7. Define an operating procedure at OHCHR to ensure that all offices establish and apply minimum standards in regard to their work on and with human rights defenders.
8. Encourage the Secretary General to carry out a full audit of UN work on human rights defenders and to develop an organisation-wide policy on supporting and protecting defenders. More generally, work closely with the Secretary-General to ensure that all UN agencies contribute to, and coordinate on, the protection of defenders and ensuring an enabling environment for their work.

9. Encourage the development and implementation of an effective UN-wide policy on preventing and addressing reprisals and strongly support continuation and adequate resourcing of the mandate of the UN Senior Official on reprisals.
10. Work to ensure that UN human rights bodies and mechanisms are accessible, effective and protective for human rights defenders, in particular by ensuring that any reform efforts are informed by the full and meaningful participation of civil society. Strong leadership from the High Commissioner is essential to ensure that the process to strengthen the Treaty Bodies in 2020, and the General Assembly mandated status review of the Human Rights Council in 2021, are underpinned by these principles.

750+ organisations highlight the vital role of the UN High Commissioner in calling out violators

Joint NGO letter to the new UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet-5 September 2018

As local, national, regional, and international civil society organizations from every corner of the world, we offer warm congratulations on your appointment as United Nations (UN) High Commissioner for Human Rights.

We are committed to a world in which every person enjoys human rights and dignity and in which our communities are fair, just and sustainable. We consider that a strong High Commissioner, working in strategic partnership with independent civil society, can contribute significantly to the realization of this vision.

You take up office at a time when human rights are under attack and when we risk the reversal of many of the achievements of the modern human rights movement. We look to you in these troubled times to be an unwavering voice in the defence of human rights, and of victims, rights-holders and human rights defenders around the world.

On every continent, the rights of individuals, communities and peoples are being violated and abused by governments and non-state actors, often with complete impunity. Civil society, peaceful dissidents, and the media are often brutally silenced. The role of your Office in ensuring robust monitoring of, and reporting on, such situations is essential for curbing violations and deterring further abuse, as well as for ensuring justice and accountability. Technical-assistance and capacity building by the OHCHR is also critical and, to be effective, should be approached holistically alongside a rigorous assessment of the rights challenges in the country, including through key indicators to measure progress and assess the degree of engagement and cooperation by the State.

As High Commissioner, you have a unique role to play in bringing country situations of concern to the attention of the UN Human Rights Council and other UN bodies, particularly situations that may not be on their agenda or which receive limited attention, often because of political pressure. This role should extend to providing briefings to the Security Council on situations either on its agenda or that, if left unattended, could represent a threat to international peace and security. Monitoring missions and inter-sessional briefings to the HRC can be initiated at the High Commissioner's prerogative, on the basis of your Office's universal mandate, bringing attention to neglected country situations and contributing towards the achievement of the Council's mandate to prevent human rights violations.

We are aware that the position of High Commissioner comes with its own challenges. Many States will insist you avoid "naming and shaming" and push you to engage in "quiet diplomacy" and to respect national sovereignty. Often, those most intolerant of criticism and most forceful in suppressing dissent will speak the loudest in seeking to mute your voice. Survivors, victims and defenders on the front line in countries where their rights are being violated will rely on you as a human rights champion, to have the courage and conviction to call out violators clearly and publicly, even when it's challenging or unpopular with governments.

Globally, the rights essential to civic space are being systematically undermined. Civil society and human rights defenders face severe daily risks in their struggle to defend human rights on the ground, including imprisonment, asset-freezes, defamatory campaigns, torture, enforced disappearance, and even death. Risks are also present in the UN context, where individuals frequently face intimidation, harassment or reprisals for their engagement with the UN. We urge you to be a staunch defender of the rights of defenders both on the

ground and at the UN, to publicly call out violators, and to undertake or push for investigations into attacks and reprisals. We also encourage you to take full advantage of the distinct, often innovative complementary role of civil society to the work of the OHCHR, and ensure the Office works closely with civil society as a strategic partner at the national, regional, and international levels.

Currently, the human rights framework itself is under unparalleled attack. Authoritarian populists are attacking the universality of human rights, disproportionately and unlawfully restricting rights in the purported interests of “national security,” often tacitly or openly encouraging attacks by their followers or vigilantes on rights defenders as well as the vulnerable and poor, while selectively interpreting human rights and seeking to co-opt or subvert human rights mechanisms to suit their political agendas. Safeguarding and strengthening universal human rights norms and mechanisms should be a core responsibility of the High Commissioner.

The current climate highlights the need for a strong public advocacy role for your mandate in the defence of international human rights law and the international human rights system, as well as a strong role internally within the UN to mainstream respect for human rights throughout the work of UN organs and agencies, and within the Sustainable Development Agenda.

Once again, we congratulate you on your new role, and stand ready to support you and your Office in the fulfilment of your vital mandate.

Signed by ISHR, Human Rights Watch and over 750 other NGOs

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Photo: Michelle Bachelet Official site