

## Syria top of the Council's agenda at opening session

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Later in the session, at the request of Qatar, Turkey, and the US, an urgent debate was held on the situation in Syria, in particular in Al Qusayr. While there was general support both for Ms Pillay's remarks and the request for an urgent debate, some States, including Venezuela, Cuba, and Syria itself, criticised the focus on this issue, with Syria claiming that there are more important issues to discuss.

Ms Pillay expressed particular distress at the fact that the violence continued unchecked in this 20th year anniversary of the Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action (VDPA). Member States in Vienna had made 'powerful statements about the struggle against impunity' in the context of the wars in the former Yugoslavia. While she noted progress in this area, in the case of Syria, she said, 'we in the international community are failing to meet our fundamental obligations to the victims'.

Ms Pillay underlined the crucial role that civil society played in developing the VDPA. She described it as 'particularly depressing' that today policy measures were being enacted across all regions that could severely undermine the ability of non-governmental organisations to carry out their work. She expressed concern too at continuing reports of reprisals against human rights defenders.

Her comments were echoed by many States. The US drew attention to the Russian NGO law that requires NGOs to register as 'foreign agents' if they receive funding from abroad, and a draft law in Egypt that would also restrict NGO operations. The US urged the Governments of Russia and Egypt to consult with civil society on this type of legislation and to guarantee the right to freedom of association.

Norway expressed particular concern about systematic discrimination and violence faced by women human rights defenders and those working on issues of sexual orientation and gender identity. It called for States' attention and guidance from the Office of the High Commissioner (OHCHR) on how a gender perspective can be integrated into efforts to create a safe and enabling environment for the defence of human rights. Norway also noted the high number of submissions to the working group on business and human rights relating to harassment, persecution and reprisals faced by human rights defenders. In this context Norway called for the speedy implementation of the Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights, including by protecting human rights defenders working in this area.

Chile, adding its voice to the concerns around restrictive NGO legislation, also joined Ms Pillay in reminding States that the international community committed itself 20 years ago in Vienna to advancing a pluralist civil society and that States need to guarantee security to human rights defenders.

Ms Pillay drew attention to the work that OHCHR has done in achieving progress in societies in transition. She pointed to the now well-established country office in Tunisia, which has contributed to a national dialogue in the country involving all key elements of society. In contrast, she noted that in several other States in the

region there has been a failure to include a wide range of actors from civil society in a constructive and respectful dialogue.

Ireland on behalf of the EU also commended the country office in Tunisia, but questioned why there had been no progress towards establishing an office in Egypt. It also called on Bahrain and Myanmar to establish country presences, noting in the case of the latter that a country office with full mandate could assist the Government to address its human rights challenges, including in Rakhine State. Pakistan, on behalf of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), joined the High Commissioner in strongly urging the Government of Myanmar to take resolute steps to stop violence and resolve this long-standing issue.

The US noted challenges to the independence of OHCHR and called for all States to cooperate with and facilitate visits from OHCHR, to ensure that it can continue to provide its technical assistance and expertise to States. Further, while Norway too commended the High Commissioner and her office for efforts to follow up on the mandates given to her by the Council, it also highlighted the uncertain financial situation of the office, and proposed that the 20th anniversary of the VDPA to be used as an opportunity to establish a sustainable economic based for 'a strong and effective office, capable of facing the challenges of the next decades'.

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