

GA73 | First ever High Level Event on Human Rights Defenders

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The first ever UN General Assembly High Level Event has taken place to mark twenty years since the adoption of the UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders. States and UN officials made significant statements about the importance of the work of human rights defenders, but all at a time of multiplying threats and attacks against defenders globally.



At the first UN General Assembly High Level Event on human rights defenders, speakers from the UN Secretary General through to the Special Rapporteur on the Human Rights Defenders addressed the plenary. For the first time a civil society speaker addressed the GA at high level event - an important precedent - but no civil society interventions were permitted from the floor. Such restrictions - a point of contention amongst States during the organisation of the event - point, once again, to the powerful pushback against human rights defenders globally.

'We were very disappointed that at an event to recognize the vital role of defenders, their contribution was so limited,' said ISHR's Madeleine Sinclair. 'We are grateful to those States that pointed out the paradox and fought for greater participation before and during the event itself'.

The voice of civil society was represented at the event by human rights lawyer and ISHR Board member, Alice Mogwe, who brought to the plenary the [Action Plan](#) prepared at the recent Human Rights Defenders World Summit in Paris.

'I am proud to be a human rights defender. I am proud of the efforts made by my colleagues, every single day, in communities across the globe,' she said. 'Human rights defenders work to make the world a fairer, more just, and more peaceful place.'

UN figureheads and officials spoke positively about the role of defenders and of concern about attacks against them. The Secretary General spoke of 'a growth of intolerance and shrinking space for civil society'. The High Commissioner on Human Rights noted that defenders lend 'their voices to groups that otherwise are not heard' thereby making 'their societies more inclusive.'

'If we do not protect those who are caring for our rights, injustice will come knocking at our door,' said the President of the General Assembly,

State representatives also spoke about the essential work of defenders. Tunisia noted that 'human rights defenders are primary partners with States in upholding rights', and were instrumental in defining policies and programmes for 'building democracy and achieving inclusive and sustainable development' - 'a multi-stakeholder' project.

Others highlighted the ways States must step up to ensure defenders' work is promoted and protected.

'As member States we all have to question our roles and approaches. Attacks against human rights defenders are attacks against everyone's rights,' said Canada.

Norway noted, 'only weak leaders fear being corrected.'

Several speakers noted the numbers of deaths of human rights defenders. In 2017, 312 Human Rights Defenders in 27 countries were killed for their peaceful work. They were mostly engaged in defending land, environmental and indigenous peoples' rights - often within the context of mega projects and extractive industries.

'States spoke of the vital importance of the work of defenders, and yet the fact is that attacks against them escalate,' said ISHR's Eleanor Openshaw.

'UN resolutions and expert reports have long indicated the importance of unequivocal statements recognizing the importance of the work of defenders and the right to defend rights. It is welcome these are made at the General Assembly, but they also need to be made on a regular basis at every level of State as a means to promote the work of defenders and fight impunity in case of threat and attack,' she added.

In regard to approaches on how to better promote and protect human rights defenders, the EU spoke of the need for 'global partnerships' to address the 'tremendous pressure' civil society faces in many countries and 'even here at the UN'.

Former Special Representative of the Secretary General, Hina Jilani, noted that defenders continued to face difficulties gaining access to UN personnel at country level and 'a disturbing lack of response to human rights concerns that they encountered' which needed to be addressed.

Michel Forst, Special Rapporteur on human rights defenders proposed that human rights defenders should be a focus integrated into all UN strategies. 'Why not draw up UN guidelines on the protection of human rights defenders, like the EU guidelines?' he asked.

The high level event was called for in the [2017 General Assembly resolution](#) on human rights defenders, the first to focus on the implementation of obligations regarding defenders.

'The high level event has shown how much more needs to be done to encourage people to defend rights and protect those who do,' said Openshaw. 'The GA must redouble its efforts to that end.'

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