

HRC46 | Protecting human rights defenders isn't rocket science, says Special Rapporteur

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Human rights defenders keep being killed because those responsible are rarely held accountable, the Special Rapporteur on human rights defenders told the Human Rights Council today. Rafts of recommendations exist on how to protect defenders. What's needed is that states show the political will to do so.



[*Versión en español*](#)

The Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders, Mary Lawlor, presented her [first report](#) to the Human Rights Council, focusing on the killings of defenders. She provided the Council with figures - including that 1323 human rights defenders were killed between 2015 and 2019 in at least 64 countries.

'This is a bloodbath we're talking about,' said ISHR's Eleanor Openshaw. 'Each killing represents unimaginable loss for family, colleagues and friends, as well as violating and diminishing the rights they defended.'

'Defenders are essential to promoting justice, equality and accountability, and the enormous value of this contribution is simply being wasted,' she added.

Killings of defenders is an indicator by which progress toward the realisation of the SDGs is measured, and in her report Mary Lawlor seeks to encourage better documentation, analysis and reporting to address killings. Lawlor noted that the murder of defenders could be averted by three principal approaches: embedding protection in legislation, policy and practice; tackling impunity; and educating the public about defending human rights.

[#HRC46](#): "Recommendations. It's not rocket science. Protecting human rights defenders depends on political will and embedding, in laws and practice and policy, the necessary things to do that." [#StopHRDKillings](#)

— Mary Lawlor UN Special Rapporteur HRDs (@MaryLawlorhrds) [March 8, 2021](#)

ISHR was pleased to see several of the recommendations we made in [input](#) it provided the Special Rapporteur in the preparation of her report, echoed in her own detailed list. These included recommendations related to the need to:

- Speak about the positive contribution of defenders regularly and publicly, and that threats against defenders be publicly denounced.
- Ensure investigations and prosecutions into killings should focus on not only individual but systemic factors contributing to threats, attacks and killings.

Ms Lawlor referenced in her report ISHR's list of countries with specific defender protection laws and policy frameworks. This is part of ISHR's [model law on protection](#), which lays out minimum standards for their development.

Rapporteur's country visit to Peru

In addition to her annual report, the Special Rapporteur spoke of the [visit of her predecessor to Peru](#) in early 2020. The Special Rapporteur [highlighted](#) the stigmatisation experienced by human rights defenders, the lack

of recognition of their work, and the lack of effective protection responses.

ISHR was pleased to join partners, the Red Muquí, in preparing a statement for the dialogue with the Special Rapporteur. You can read the statement [here](#) (in Spanish) or watch the video below:

We called on Peru to establish a multi-sectoral mechanism for the protection of defenders by 2021, as foreseen in the National Human Rights Plan. In the dialogue, Peru indicated that it was willing to review and strengthen protection measures. We also asked the Rapporteur to request a follow-up visit to Peru so she can provide them with support and encouragement in the implementation of the recommendations made to the government.

‘Peru could decide to work with the office of the Rapporteur in systematically reviewing and implementing her recommendations and the Rapporteur could offer her assistance, including through follow up visits,’ said Openshaw. ‘Such an approach would mark Peru as being serious about the change needed to effectively promote the work of defenders and protect them,’ she added.

Rapporteur’s concluding words to the Council

During the dialogue with states most voiced support to the mandate. To the voices – few but persistent – that questioned the credibility of the Special Rapporteur’s methodology and findings, Mary Lawlor cited the robustness of the methodology employed in compiling her report, and her 40 year experience of working with defenders.

‘I know who is and who isn’t a human rights defender. I know the difference between a defender and a terrorist. I know the difference between a defender and a political activist,’ she said.

The Special Rapporteur also noted that the mandate needed resources, making a specific request to states to fund the position of a junior officer to support her work.

The dialogue with the Special Rapporteur took place on International Women’s Day. Mary Lawlor noted her deep respect for the work of women human rights defenders. She recalled Honduran defender, Berta Caceres, for whose murder three years ago her family and friends have long sought justice and accountability.

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Photo: image from UN webcast