

Geneva, 26 May 2016

Mr Choi Kyonglim
President of the United Nations Human Rights Council
Permanent Mission of the Republic of Korea to the United Nations in Geneva
Avenue de l'Ariana 1
Case postale 42
1211 Genève 20

Re: Act of reprisals and intimidation against the Head of Advocacy of the Human Rights House Foundation during the 31st session of the United Nations Human Rights Council

Mr Ambassador,

We would like to bring to your attention a case of an online death threat made to Florian Irminger, Head of Advocacy and Geneva Office at the Human Rights House Foundation during the 31st session of the United Nations Human Rights Council.

Civil society organisations and government representatives in Geneva actively engage in debates and distribute information using social media, including Twitter. At 13:41 on Thursday 24 March 2016, during the adoption of the resolution on human rights defenders, the user operating under the name “@ZloyRRR” sent a tweet directed at Florian Irminger, Head of Advocacy and Geneva Office at the Human Rights House Foundation, stating “our blades are sharp”, together with a graphic of a flayed human body.¹ The account of the individual making this threat included multiple tweets in the Russian language, the profile picture included an image of the ceiling in room XX, and a succession of tweets made clear that the individual was closely monitoring the debate and vote on the Russian-led amendments to the human rights defenders resolution.

The International Service for Human Rights transferred the information about the incident to the Secretariat of the Human Rights Council and to the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights. Immediately after, the tweet was removed from the account. However, the account user continued the smear campaign against other NGOs and governmental representatives attending the Human Rights Council. Direct messages against Geneva-based human rights defenders from this account have included expressions such as “Miserable human rights defenders”, “Geneva HRDs have no brain attached”, “Something bad with your hearing” and “Use some calming pills.”

Based on investigations by the Human Rights House Foundation, the evidence strongly suggests that the Twitter account from which the threat originated does not belong to a so called “Internet troll,” but to an accredited representative of the Russian Federation, working at the Permanent Mission of the Russian Federation to the United Nations Office in Geneva. We will share this evidence with you privately upon request.

We are extremely concerned about the threatening nature of the message. We believe this issue must be treated with utmost seriousness. Threatening an NGO representative undermines the Human Rights Council’s work and constitutes impermissible intimidation and reprisal. In this regard we recall Human Rights Council Resolution 24/24, which urges States to “prevent and refrain from all acts of intimidation or reprisal against those who seek to cooperate or have cooperated with the United Nations, its representatives and mechanisms in the field of human rights, or who have provided testimony or information to them.”

¹ See the storyboard of the tweets provided in attachment.

In light of the information above, we urge you as the custodian of the integrity and quality of the Human Rights Council, to ensure that this case of reprisal is fully and promptly investigated and effectively remedied in line with Council resolutions 24/24, including by:

- Initiating an investigation into the death threat addressed to Florian Irminger;
- Following up with the Russian Federation's representatives at the most senior level in Geneva, insist on undertakings to investigate, hold the perpetrators accountable and report back to the Council concerning measures taken;
- Publicly releasing relevant correspondence on this case; and
- Publicly addressing the case at the upcoming 32nd session of the Human Rights Council;

Finally, we note that this incident took place in the context of an increasingly threatening tone used in social media against human rights defenders tweeting about the activities of the Human Rights Council.

The threat against a representative of a Geneva based international NGO has to be seen in the context of continuing intimidation and reprisals against human rights defenders in places where they enjoy far less legal and physical protection. Further, as stressed by the Secretary-General in his annual reports on reprisals, reported cases are only the "tip of the iceberg" and that "far too many people are fearful of reporting reprisals aimed at silencing them." It is therefore imperative that this – and any other allegation of intimidation or reprisal – are thoroughly followed up on. This would send a much needed signal to persons cooperating with the Council that their safety is being taken seriously, and to States carrying out or condoning reprisals that their actions will have a political cost.

We therefore also urge you to increase efforts to prevent such incidents, including by publicly addressing cases of intimidation and reprisals, threats and backlash against civil society representatives operating at the Human Rights Council, including online intimidation.

We remain at your full disposal for any further information you may need on this case.

Yours sincerely,

Maria Dahle
Executive Director, Human Rights House Foundation

Philip Lynch
Director, International Service for Human Rights (ISHR)

John Fisher
Geneva Advocacy Director, Human Rights Watch

Antoine Bernard
Chief Executive Officer, International Federation for Human Rights, within the framework of the
Observatory for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders

Gerald Staberock
Secretary-General, World Organisation against Torture, within the framework of the Observatory for the
Protection of Human Rights Defenders

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Copies to: Members of the Bureau Human Rights Council
Secretary General of the United Nations
Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights
Permanent Mission of the Russian Federation to the United Nations Office in Geneva
Relevant other permanent missions to the United Nations Office in Geneva
Office of the Prosecutor General of the Republic and Canton of Geneva



Florian Irminger @FlorianIrminger · 29m

Amendments presented by #Russia #Cuba #Egypt are contrary to the very purpose of the resolution on #HumanRightsDefenders #HRC31

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Zloy RRR

@zloyrrr



+ Follow

< @FlorianIrminger our blades are sharp) >



1:41 PM - 24 Mar 2016

↩️ ↻ ⋮



Reply to @zloyrrr @FlorianIrminger