

Human Rights Council 20th session

Joint NGO statement at the closing of the session: 6 July 2012

Joint statement by Human Rights House Foundation, International Service for Human Rights (ISHR), International Federation of Human Rights Leagues (FIDH), Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies (CIHRS), International Commission of Jurists (ICJ), Canadian AIDS/HIV Legal Network, CIVICUS World Alliance for Citizen Participation, Asian Forum for Human Rights and Development (Forum Asia).

Madame President, Madame High Commissioner, thank you.

This session has seen important steps in defining the Council's path in the future. While we regret that too many States still attempt to deflect attention to human rights concerns by asserting that other countries have similar or worse problems, we are encouraged by a series of joint initiatives affirming a cross-regional willingness to hear the call of human rights defenders on the ground, and deal with both chronic and urgent country situations.

The joint statement on Bahrain delivered under item 4 with significant support is a case in point. The voluntary commitment by a number of States, led by the Maldives, to heed the call of independent voices in defining country action is a further example of progress. While we welcome this commitment, it has to stand the practical test in helping the Council rise above its habitual political tangle when considering human rights action.

The creation of two new country specific special procedures during this session on Belarus and Eritrea confirms the Council's willingness to do more. However, quantity does not equal quality. In this regard we welcome Norway's remarks calling for attention to the death penalty in Belarus. We also hope to see resolutions on country situations consider violations committed by all actors, and regret that the resolution on Mali lacks in that regard.

We also feel that the Council has not lived up to expectations in regard to Syria, by failing to contribute its piece to the overall response by the international community. The Council should focus on providing justice to victims of human rights violations, and the way to do that would have been a clear recommendation for ICC referral.

Madame President,

The Council has also continued its positive track record on a number of thematic areas. The first ever panel discussion focusing on Women Human Rights Defenders is key in furthering the recognition and legitimacy of their work, and ultimately their protection. We look forward to continuing attention by the Council on the specific nature of the challenges faced by them.

We appreciate the Council's first ever affirmation of the right to nationality. The resolution is an overdue call to action for states to intensify their efforts to address and prevent statelessness, which affects millions of people and makes them vulnerable to other serious human rights abuses.

We welcome the Council's first resolution on conscientious objection to military service.

We also encourage the Council to systematically pay attention to victims' access to remedies and reparations, as it has done in the resolutions on violence against women, trafficking in persons and the situation of human rights in Syria.

A number of special procedures have presented their first reports to the Council. The first report of the Special Rapporteur on freedom of assembly and association is important in

protecting and expanding the operating space for civil society around the world. We also welcome the announcement of the Working Group on human rights and business of its intention to carry out country visits. We note that some have emphasised the need for the Working Group to contribute to and not hinder the potential development of further international standards.

Finally, reflecting on the contribution of civil society in the work of the Council, the record is mixed. Although it is a strong testimony to the role of NGOs in adding substance to all aspects of the Council's work, we regret the continuing challenges to our full and effective participation. In particular, the attempts to undermine the speaking rights of NGOs in informal discussions have continued. We appreciate the firm stand of the bureau in safeguarding the practice of the Commission and Council, and hope to see this principled support continue.

Let me close by highlighting the successful delivery of a number of high-quality remote statements by NGOs and NHRIs, and we look forward to the adoption of UPR reports in that regard.