

Statement presented at High-Level Plenary Meeting of the UN General Assembly on the Adoption of the Declaration on the Right and Responsibility of Individuals, Groups and Organs of Society to Promote and Protect Universally Recognised Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms. Alice Mogwe. Human Rights Defenders World Summit 2018. New York. 18 December 2018.

President of the General Assembly

Secretary-General

High Commissioner for Human Rights

Minister of Foreign Affairs of Norway

Representatives of Argentina and Italy

Special Rapporteur on the situation of Human Rights Defenders

Excellencies, State representatives and Civil society colleagues,

From the outset, I would like to thank the President of the General Assembly for inviting me to address this High-Level plenary meeting. I would also like to thank the co-facilitators of this event, Argentina, Italy and Norway, for their tireless work in organising it. In particular, I would like to acknowledge Norway, whose leadership in facilitating the adoption of the General Assembly Resolution on Human Rights Defenders, has made today's High Level plenary meeting possible.

Twenty years ago, on 8-11 December 1998, Amnesty International, FIDH, the Fondation Mitterand and ATD Quart Monde convened the first Human Rights Defenders World Summit. Its aim was to celebrate the adoption, by consensus, of the UN Declaration on the Right and Responsibility of Individuals, Groups and Organs of Society to promote and protect universally recognised human rights and fundamental freedoms – also known as the *UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders*. It recognised for the first time that everyone – individually and collectively – has the right and duty to promote, protect and defend human rights.

On 29-31 October 2018, I was among the hundreds of participants gathered at the second Human Rights Defenders World Summit in Paris. I bring to this body the outcomes of that Summit. The three broad areas identified were the following:

- the 70th Anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) and 20th Anniversary of the UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders
- Global challenges facing Human Rights Defenders; and

- Urgent calls for action, directed to States, non-State actors and other stakeholders, to protect Human Rights Defenders.

1. **70th Anniversary of the UDHR and 20th Anniversary of the UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders**

It was noted that on the 70th Anniversary of the UDHR, much still remains to be done to ensure dignity for all, to guarantee peace, security and sustainable development. This can only be done if we advance justice, freedom and equality for all – the ultimate goals of the UDHR. A key positive outcome of the Human Rights Declaration was the establishment of the mechanism of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of Human Rights Defenders in 2000.

2. **Global challenges facing Human Rights Defenders**

Globally, Human Rights Defenders have constantly been attacked, and are often killed for protecting and promoting civil and political rights. However, recent data collected by Frontline Defenders is showing a new trend in violations. 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. Over 3500 Human Rights Defenders have been killed over the last 20 years, according to the Human Rights Defenders Memorial.

Democratic values are under threat and authoritarianism, unaccountable governments and businesses, systemic corruption, inequality and discrimination, overexploitation of natural resources, religious and political extremism are all on the rise.

Human Rights Defenders working for the protection of the dignity of all persons are often forgotten, under-resourced, discredited, discriminated against, criminalized, arrested, tortured, disappeared – and their NGOs closed down. Such attacks have broadened in scope and have reached alarming levels, especially within the context of countering terrorism and preventing violent extremism. This has resulted in an increasing shrinking and closing of independent civil society space.

Unfortunately, this challenge to human rights and to those who defend them, has clearly permeated the United Nations, an organisation which has human rights as one of its pillars, according to the UN Charter. The fact that my colleagues and friends are observing this High-Level plenary meeting from the gallery and are not permitted to address this forum, which is celebrating their work as Human Rights Defenders, is a clear indication of how regressive policies are undermining the raison d'être of this institution. Reform and openness to engage with civil

society organisations in general and with Human Rights Defenders in particular, are necessary at the UN itself, if we want to better protect and honour Human Rights Defenders.

We honour activist Human Rights Defenders who work to protect the environment and those who, confront corporate greed to preserve the collective rights of their community to the land.

We honour activist Human Rights Defenders who are being criminalised, delegitimised and defamed for their work in saving lives at sea and protecting migrants.

We honour activist Human Rights Defenders who are criminalised, tortured and jailed for exercising their freedom of expression and opinion, especially through social media.

We honour activist Human Rights Defenders who are silenced for calling for free, fair and transparent elections and pursuing peaceful, democratic transitions

We honour activist Human Rights Defenders, including lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and intersex defenders and women Human Rights Defenders - who advocate for the right of all to live free and equal in dignity and rights

3. **Urgent Call to States and others**

Participants at the Summit endorsed an action plan which identified priorities for States, businesses, financial institutions, donors and intergovernmental organisations.

We call for action by all of you here.

States have the primary obligation to respect, protect and fulfill human rights and to implement the Human Rights Defenders Declaration, which was approved by consensus 20 years ago. In spite of this, the State remains the main perpetrator of violations against human rights defenders, either directly or in complicity with non-State actors. Instead, States must take urgent action to recognise the essential role of human rights defenders, protect those at risk, and take concrete measures to foster a safe and enabling environment, including through adoption of national action plans on the protection of human rights defenders.

In 2016, civil society organisations, through consultative processes facilitated by the International Service for Human Rights, produced a model law for the recognition and protection of human rights defenders.

States must also break the cycle of impunity by holding perpetrators to account for attacks against human rights defenders. Killings, criminalisation and smear campaigns must stop.

UN bodies and agencies themselves should put the protection of human rights defenders *Up Front*, ensuring that UN mechanisms are safe and accessible to defenders, that Human Rights Defenders are free from intimidation and reprisals, and that in the field, the UN make the protection of defenders, paramount. The death of Cao Shunli, the sexual assault and torture of Ebtisam Al-Saegh, death threats against Hedme Castro, the arbitrary arrest of Khurram Parvez - all happened because of their engagement with the United Nations. There must be a zero tolerance policy on reprisals.

Our action plan also includes recommendations to businesses, financial institutions and the donor community.

Conclusion

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. Human rights defenders work to make the world a fairer, more just, and more peaceful place.

“Through our daily fight, we are finding proof that utopia can become a reality. Anything which is impossible today, we will make possible tomorrow through the strength of our conviction, our determination and our actions”.

First HRD World Summit Press Release in 1998