

## [African States must not turn their backs on human rights defenders at the United Nations](#)

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(New York) - In an unprecedented move, a group of African States has sought to undermine the authority of the UN Human Rights Council - the world's top human rights body - by opposing a decision of the Council to strengthen the protection of human rights defenders from attacks and reprisals.

The group of States, led by Gabon and joined by others such as China and Russia, was successful in securing the passage of a resolution in the Third Committee of the UN General Assembly to defer the appointment of a senior UN official tasked with coordinating the protection of human rights defenders. This is despite the Human Rights Council overwhelmingly passing a resolution in September calling on the UN Secretary-General to appoint 'a United Nations-wide senior focal point' to combat reprisals and intimidation.

'Attacks, intimidation and reprisals against people who work to expose and seek accountability for human rights violations at the UN violate international law and undermine the UN itself,' said Madeleine Sinclair, Legal Counsel with the International Service for Human Rights.

'It is deeply concerning that the international community has not stood united in the fight against reprisals. It is particularly concerning that African States such as South Africa, home to so many courageous and legendary human rights defenders, actively opposed vital measures to improve their protection,' Ms Sinclair said.

A number of African States took a more principled stand and abstained or absented themselves from the vote, including Cote d'Ivoire, the Central African Republic, Chad, Guinea-Bissau, Morocco and Rwanda. 'We welcome the principled stand taken by a small number of African States. Progressive States from all regions should support human rights defenders as essential partners in promoting human rights, democracy and the rule of law', Ms Sinclair said.

The decision in the Third Committee was taken with a narrow margin of only two votes, with 76 States voting against the Human Rights Council resolution on reprisals and 74 States, including Mexico, the European Union, the USA, Switzerland and Norway, taking a stand to support human rights defenders.

'Not only has the Third Committee shown its contempt for human rights defenders engaging with the UN, but this resolution also directly challenges the authority of the Human Rights Council to direct the UN's work on human rights' said ISHR's Human Rights Council Advocacy Director, Michael Ineichen

'It is disappointing to see many States turn their back on human rights defenders in the Third Committee, including some which actually supported the Human Rights Council resolution only a few months ago,' Mr Ineichen said.

'It is now imperative that the plenary of the General Assembly set aside the Third Committee decision, follow the Human Rights Council's lead and call for the appointment of an anti-reprisals focal point.' Mr Ineichen said.

'In doing so, the General Assembly should ensure that the focal point has the political authority and weight to confront States that tolerate reprisals, and engage the entire UN system in better protecting civil society'.

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