

UN General Assembly turns its back on human rights defenders

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(New York) - In an unprecedented move, the African Group of States at the UN has led the General Assembly in a vote that puts on hold a Human Rights Council initiative to strengthen the protection of human rights defenders from attacks and reprisals.

The Group, together with other States such as China, Cuba, and Russia, successfully put forward a resolution 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, home to so many courageous human rights defenders, actively opposed vital measures to improve their protection,' Ms Sinclair said.

The decision was taken with a narrow margin of only three votes, with 83 States voting to set aside the Human Rights Council resolution on reprisals and 80 States from all regions of the world other than Africa taking a stand to support human rights defenders.

'We welcome the principled stand taken by progressive States to support human rights defenders as essential partners in promoting human rights, democracy and the rule of law', Ms Sinclair said.

States strongly supporting immediate action to better protect human rights defenders from attacks and reprisals included Australia, Brazil, Costa Rica, the European Union, Korea, Norway, Switzerland, Thailand and the United States.

In the face of an African Group position, only two African States took a more principled stand and absented themselves from the vote: Chad and Morocco.

'Regretfully not a single African State - not even the ones that supported the Human Rights Council resolution on reprisals only a few months ago - stood up in support of human rights defenders and against reprisals', Ms Sinclair said.

'By setting aside the resolution of the Human Rights Council and deferring the appointment of the focal point, the General Assembly has signalled its reluctance to protect human rights defenders from attacks,' Nicole Bjerler, Deputy Representative of Amnesty International's UN office in New York, said.

'This resolution also directly challenges the authority of the Human Rights Council to effectively coordinate and mainstream human rights within the United Nations system' said Ms Bjerler.

Amnesty International and the International Service for Human Rights are now calling on the General Assembly to consider the appointment of the focal point without delay so that the UN may begin to coordinate a much-needed international response to reprisals and intimidation against human rights defenders.

'Non-governmental organisations and human rights defenders worldwide will look now to the General Assembly for leadership and protection. Let's hope they are not disappointed,' Ms Bjerler said.

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