A tribute to human rights defenders and the High Commissioner

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Navi Pillay’s leadership as the world’s most prominent human rights defender has contributed to the empowerment, visibility and protection of human rights defenders all over the world, says Irish Ambassador to the UN Patricia O’Brien.

Remarks by Patricia O’Brien, Ambassador and Permanent Representative of Ireland, at a Civil Society Reception for UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Navi Pillay, in Geneva on 21 July 2014

I have had the great pleasure of working closely with the High Commissioner for Human Rights, Navi Pillay, for a number of years. Navi has been a wonderful colleague and friend. She has always been a strong voice, both within the Secretariat of the UN and without, reminding us all of the need to safeguard and respect the rule of law and the universality, indivisibility and interdependence of all human rights.

It is an honour to have been asked this evening to pay tribute to Navi Pillay. Quite simply, Navi is one of you; and has always been a courageous and resolute voice for human rights defenders, wherever they may be. She has been a strong advocate who speaks out without fear or favour.

I would like to sincerely thank the High Commissioner, on behalf of everyone here, for her tremendous commitment and tireless efforts over the last six years. Her leadership as the world’s most prominent human rights defender has contributed to the empowerment, visibility and protection of human rights defenders all over the world. While her task has often been difficult, the High Commissioner has acted throughout her tenure as a fundamental underpinning for defenders and civil society at every level; local, national, regional and international.

The importance of human rights defenders cannot be overstated, as the full enjoyment of human rights cannot be achieved unless the right to defend those rights is protected and respected. Indeed, the international human rights system can only succeed when the fruits of our discussions here in the Council and of course the recommendations of the UPR, Special Procedures and international Treaty Bodies are translated into law and practice.

And we are particularly grateful to the High Commissioner for the vital role she has played in the strengthening of the treaty body system through the lengthy process initiated by her in Dublin in 2009, which led to the adoption of GA resolution 68/268 in April this year.
The High Commissioner has continually emphasised the strong protection and prevention dimension of defenders through their crucial role in guaranteeing human rights on the ground. Through investigating and bringing to light human rights abuses, defenders develop democracy, rule of law and prevent future violations.

In recent years, we have seen huge changes in society – the proliferation of the internet, the rise of mass protests during and after the Arab Spring and the effects of the financial crisis have had a profound impact on the work of human rights defenders and on the space in which they operate. The introduction of increasingly restrictive measures by Governments has resulted in defenders facing extraordinary risks. They, their families and those associated with them, face harassment, stigmatisation, physical violence, arrest, torture and even the threat of death on a daily basis. The risks faced by defenders whose work challenges social structures, economic interests, traditional practices and interpretation of religious precepts are particularly severe.

Where the space for defenders is compromised, the capacity of the State to ensure respect for human rights and to respond to economic, humanitarian, or other crises is severely weakened. It was in this context that Ireland, along with a cross regional group of States, presented a resolution to the Council last September on the importance of civil society space.

While the resolution focused on space for civil society as a whole which encompasses countless actors and activities beyond the promotion and protection of human rights, human rights defenders are of course a crucial part of civil society and have been particularly affected by the shrinkage of civil society space.

Human rights defenders ensure that the primary duty and responsibility of States to promote and protect human rights and fundamental freedoms is fulfilled, but in order to do so, they must be able to carry out their activities in an environment that empowers them to defend human rights for all. Recognition, empowerment and protection of defenders must be led by Governments to ensure their participation as a positive partner in addressing the many human rights challenges we all face.

We all accept that in order to achieve and maintain peace, you must first cultivate justice. The work of human rights defenders all over the world to promote equality, dignity and freedom, is a testament to that aspiration. Through her principled advocacy for the protection of human rights defenders, the High Commissioner has played an indispensable role in ensuring that aspiration is fulfilled.

We salute your courage, dedication and unwavering integrity and sincerely thank you for the significant legacy you leave behind.

An album of photographs from the event has been posted to Facebook.

You can also access a summary and other remarks from the event here.

Patricia O'Brien is Ambassador and Permanent Representative of Ireland to the UN in Geneva