

## [West African States: Enact laws and establish mechanisms to protect human rights defenders](#)

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(Abidjan, Cote d'Ivoire) - West African States should develop and enact national laws on the protection of human rights defenders, establish and resource independent national human rights institutions, and end impunity for attacks against human rights defenders, ISHR, the Coalition Ivoirienne des Défenseurs des Droits Humains (CIDDH) and the Réseau Ouest Africain des Défenseurs des Droits Humains (ROADDH) said today.

The call came following a regional consultation convened by ISHR, CIDDH and ROADDH with over 20 human rights defenders from 13 jurisdictions from across Francophone Africa. The consultation also benefited from the attendance and expert input of the UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights Defenders, Michel Forst, and the African Commission Special Rapporteur on Human Rights Defenders, Reine Alapini Gansou.

'The work of human rights defenders is essential to promoting good government, combating corruption and ensuring inclusive development,' said ISHR's Africa Programme Manager, Clement Voulé.

'In turn, the development and effective implementation of a national human rights defender law and protection mechanism is vital to enabling human rights defenders to undertake this essential work, free from attacks and insecurity,' Mr Voulé said.

'Building on the good practice of Cote d'Ivoire, we encourage all West African States to enact a human rights defender law,' said Pédan Marthe Coulibaly, National Coordinator of CIDDH.

'Such a law should operate to promote and protect human rights defenders, respond to the particular protection needs of vulnerable groups such as women human rights defenders and defenders of LGBT rights, and penalise and end impunity for attacks against defenders,' Ms Coulibaly said.

In addition to calling for the enactment of enabling laws, including as to freedom of association and peaceful assembly and as to access to information, participants at the consultation emphasised the importance of repealing or amending laws and policies which operate to restrict the work of human rights defenders. Such laws include those laws criminalising 'homosexuality', laws which impose significant restrictions on the conduct of protest, and laws which severely fetter the right to freedom of expression and association by reference to broad concepts such as 'public order' and 'national security'.

'Access to information, the repeal of restrictive laws, and the challenging of so-called "traditional values" that are often used to justify violations of women's rights and LGBT rights, are all essential to ensuring a safe

environment for human rights defenders and a healthy and inclusive community,' said Abdoul Gadiry Diallo of ROADDH.

Defenders at the consultation came from 15 States - including Benin, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Congo, Cote d'Ivoire, Democratic Republic of Congo, Gabon, Guinea, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Senegal and Togo - and working on diverse issues - including women's rights, LGBT rights, good government, corruption, impunity, freedom of expression, corporate accountability, transitional justice, and the rule of law.

Following the consultation, the UN and African Commission Special Rapporteurs on Human Rights Defenders issued a [joint communiqué](#).

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