

[At-risk human rights defenders draw attention at ISHR side event](#)

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A panel discussion on the issue of human rights defenders who are most at risk took place on Monday 5 March at Palais des Nations in Geneva. The side event was co-hosted by ISHR and other human rights organisations, with the aim of drawing attention to the challenges experienced by the most vulnerable groups of defenders.

The discussion coincided with [the presentation of the UN Special Rapporteur](#) on human rights defenders' report to the Human Rights Council on the same day.

The key speakers at the ISHR side event were Mr Davi Kopenawa, leader of the Yanomami indigenous group from the Amazonia, Mr João Paulo Charleaux, a Brazilian journalist from Conectas Direitos Humanos, and Mr Kim Smeby, speaking on behalf of Ms Margaret Sekaggya, the Special Rapporteur on human rights defenders. The panel was moderated by Ms Idun Tvedt, of the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

The event particularly focused on the key groups of defenders highlighted in Ms Sekaggya's report: journalists, environmental, student and youth rights defenders, and those working on land issues. The Special Rapporteur described these defenders as being significant need of protection, and faced by risks that 'directly affect their physical integrity and that of their family members, but also involve the abusive use of legal frameworks against them and the criminalization of their work.'

Mr Kopenawa explained at the side event that, as an environmental and indigenous human rights defender, he had faced numerous threats and attacks, the target of gold diggers and farmers who want to exploit the land. The vital role that environmental, land rights and indigenous defenders play was highlighted; one attendee of the side event recognised the significance of Mr Kopenawa's work, as he was said to be the only person able to represent the Yanomami people due to language barriers.

Mr Charleaux emphasised that media reporting was an essential element in giving visibility to violations of human rights. The Brazilian journalist said this work remained a struggle in many Latin American countries, where the three most common risks for journalists and other human rights defenders are murders committed by criminal groups, repression by security forces, and judicial and political pressures against individuals.

Mr Charleaux recommended that journalists work in networks to support each other, so that if one journalist or newspaper received threats they could call on their colleagues to research the same topic or publish the same article. He also recommended that private media companies acknowledge their responsibility and adopt measures to better protect their journalists and media workers.

Also discussed were the importance of the new technologies such as blogs and mobile phones in exposing human rights abuses, and the great risks that youth defenders and students face in speaking out against human rights violations, such as threats, violence or being refused the opportunity to continue their studies.

Following presentations by the panellists, the discussion was opened for questions from the floor. A representative of *Journalistes sans Frontières* reiterated how crucial it is to protect journalists and media workers, as to kill the messenger is to kill the message. The difficulty of establishing support networks for defenders of indigenous groups was highlighted, given their sometimes remote and dispersed locations and lack of modern technology to facilitate communication. The Special Rapporteur's secretary drew attention to the central role that youth have had in defending human rights and placing human rights issues on the agenda and the importance of protecting this vulnerable group.

The panel discussion was co-sponsored by the Asian Forum for Human Rights and Development, Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies, Conectas Direitos Humanos, Human Rights House Foundation, International Service for Human Rights, and the OMCT-FIDH Observatory on the protection of human rights defenders.

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