

[HRC40 | Council kicks off its 40th session, highlighting critical role of defenders around the globe](#)

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UN Secretary-General António Guterres opened the 40th session of the UN Human Rights Council (“the Council”) in Geneva with a call to “defend defenders” and put an end to any act of reprisals against those who share their stories. “We must not tolerate impunity”, he declared.

At opening of [#HRC40](#) [#UN](#) Secretary-General urged States to hold accountable those who carry out acts of [#reprisals](#) and crimes against [#journalists](#)

— ISHR (@ISHRglobal) [February 26, 2019](#)

Iceland, one of the newest Council members and a member of the Bureau for 2019, applauded the Council's proven value as a platform for those left voiceless, but noted that the Council could and should do even more. The Icelandic Foreign Minister emphasised that Council members should uphold the highest standards in promotion and protection of human rights, and said that States that join the Council should expect their own human rights record to be subject to scrutiny during their time as members.

As an example, Iceland highlighted the rising number of extrajudicial killings in the Philippines and also the troubling human rights situation in Saudi Arabia. Foreign Minister Gudlaugur Thór Thórdarson declared, “I cannot mention Saudi Arabia without stressing the urgent need for the kingdom to improve the status of women’s human rights.”

[.@GudlaugurThor](#) at [#HRC40](#): Widespread arbitrary arrests, torture and the persecution of human rights defenders for peacefully exercising their fundamental rights is unacceptable - always and everywhere.

— MFA Iceland (@MFAIceland) [February 25, 2019](#)

Several States announced their commitments to protecting human rights defenders. Norway announced that its key priority this session would be the adoption of a thematic resolution on human rights defenders, with a specific focus on environmental human rights defenders. Norwegian Foreign Minister Ine Eriksen

Søreide noted that environmental defenders are particularly vulnerable to violations, and described its desire to create a resolution with a strong message of support for the positive role played by these defenders. “The world needs the UN to show strong leadership in its defence and promotion of human rights,” said Eriksen Søreide.

[#Norway](#) announces their key priority on [#HRC](#) is adopting new thematic resolution on human rights defenders, citing importance of protecting environmental defenders in particular. [#HRC40](#)

— ISHR (@ISHRglobal) [February 25, 2019](#)

“Instead of cracking down on political opposition, human rights defenders, and independent media, governments should safeguard the space for information and free flow of ideas”, said the Norwegian Foreign Minister in her speech. “The resolution should send a strong message saying we support the positive role played by environmental human rights defenders, they should be protected, and perpetrators should be brought to justice.”

State representatives from over a dozen States expressed their concerns over challenges faced by defenders, especially women human rights defenders. States like the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, Belgium, Luxembourg and more stressed their determination to enhance the safety of human rights defenders as well as to fight all forms of violence and harassment against women activists.

Throughout the course of the High-Level Segment, several States drew attention to the issue of reprisals against defenders who cooperate with UN human rights mechanisms. State representatives from Ireland, Croatia, Georgia, Uruguay, Costa Rica, Finland and many others bemoaned the trend of reprisals against rights defenders who cooperate with the United Nations.

Finland extended its support to Special Procedures on adequate housing and stressed the independence of Special Procedures, sending a reminder that reprisals are prohibited before and after their visits.

Today at [#HRC40](#) Under Secretary of State Elina Kalkku expressed Finland’s support for HC Bachelet and independence of [@OHCHR](#). Also emphasising independence+impartiality of [@UN_SPExperts](#) who must be able do conduct their work without reprisals. pic.twitter.com/YPXJ95GEgN

— FinlandGeneva (@FinlandGeneva) [February 27, 2019](#)

Uruguay called for protection for defenders from any types of reprisals aimed at limiting their cooperation with the system.

Denmark called for the release of Danish-Bahraini citizen and defender, Abdulhadi al-Khawaja, who has been imprisoned in Bahrain since 2011.

Australia raised concerns about China’s alarming treatment of Uyghurs in Xinjiang.

[#HRC40](#) kicks off with high-level speakers - and with Australian FM [@MarisePayne](#) as the first to raise concerns about the discriminatory treatment (and worse) of Uyghurs in [#Xinjiang](#) [#China](#). [@PearsonElaine](#) [@PhilALynch](#)

— Sarah Brooks (@sarahmcneer) [February 25, 2019](#)

Finally, Latvia mentioned the rising number of arrests of defenders, stating that the reprisals suffered because

of cooperation with the Council are shocking. It reiterated the importance of promoting and protecting human rights and gave its support for these efforts.

At [#HRC40](#) , [#Latvia](#) condemns increasing number of arrests and [#reprisals](#) against [#HRDs](#) for cooperating with the [#HRC](#) .

— ISHR (@ISHRglobal) [February 26, 2019](#)

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