

[NGO Forum | Protecting human rights defenders working on the right of people on the move](#)

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In her opening remarks, moderator Carine Kaneza Nnantulya, Africa Advocacy Director at Human Rights Watch, highlighted the dire conditions in which defenders have to work in when defending the rights of people on the move and thanked the panellists for bringing such an important issue to be discussed during the Forum.

The UN Special Rapporteur on human rights defenders started off his allocution by observing a thought for those who were prevented from travelling to Sharm el Sheikh to participate in the NGO Forum and the 64th session of the African Commission. He then continued by presenting the findings included in [his report](#) presented to the 38th session of the Human Rights Council. These findings include among other things specific risks faced by defenders working on the rights of people on the move, especially the fear of reprisals often silencing them, stigmatisation or criminalisation by the national authorities.

Clément Nyaletsossi Voule, UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Assembly and Association, emphasised the environment in which defenders work and how restrictions imposed by States gradually reduce the civic space in which defenders operate. “States can’t continue to use the excuse of ‘national security’ to continually restrict the space of civil society. Every individual is free to exercise his freedom of association and peaceful assembly” Voule added. He highlighted the important work done by NGOs who support migrants in spite of the hostile environment they have to work in.

The last panellist highlighted another angle of the issue of people on the move by focalising on human rights defenders living in exile. “Threats don’t stop when human rights defenders become exiled. They still work in restrictive environments. How can they continue their work? Who will now protect them?” added David Meffe, Research Officer at DefendDefenders. As he explained, most of the defenders in exile thought that the move would only be temporary and as their situation extend they often lack psychological support. He presented the [extensive research](#) he has done on the issue regarding East Africa and the difficulties defenders living in exile have to overcome to pursue their work.

Finally, panellists concluded that Africa is currently facing a wave of recurring humanitarian crises and persistent human rights violations which caused millions to flee their homes in search for protection. Therefore it is primordial that the international community takes the necessary steps to protect those working to guarantee that the rights of people on the move are upheld. Millions of refugees hosted by African countries are still facing widespread human rights abuses.

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