

[International community fails to step-up on reprisals](#)

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(Geneva) - Two years ago the Council adopted a decision that called for States to use the general debate on human rights bodies and mechanisms to address the issue of reprisals against those cooperating with the UN system. Unfortunately, at this session, only three States took the opportunity to speak on this issue.

No State made mention of specific cases that require immediate attention. Disappointingly, Hungary, despite its leadership role on this issue, did not speak at all.

While the EU, Ireland, and Switzerland condemned reprisals, reaffirming that the primary responsibility to protect civil society and human rights defenders lies with States, there was no mention made of what the UN and Council could do in order to address the threats and attacks against human rights defenders.

NGOs did use the opportunity to raise awareness of a number of cases of reprisals, such as the cases of Oscar Kamau Kingara, John Paul Oulu and Judge Maria Lourdes Afiuni.

Reprisals violate the right to unhindered access to and communication with international human rights bodies, a right clearly set out in international human rights standards.

ISHR is pleased that Hungary is leading on this issue again at this session, and that the draft reaffirms this right. Similarly, a draft text on civil society space, led by Ireland, also reaffirms this right. ISHR looks forward to the adoption of both texts by consensus.

At the same time, the disappointing implementation of the previous decision on reprisals during the general debate on human rights bodies and mechanisms points to a gap between what States commit to in resolutions and decisions, and how they act.

The urgency of addressing attempts to block participation in the work of the UN's human rights system is evident by several attempts, some successful, to block access to this session of the Human Rights Council. A defender from China has been prevented from travelling to Geneva and defenders from Cameroon have reportedly been threatened with retaliation when they return home.

Further, China attempted to block a Chinese NGO attending the session from speaking. The State interrupted the speaker, questioning his legitimacy and requesting several times for his identity to be verified by the Secretariat. This motion was supported by Russia, Belarus, Cuba and Venezuela. The US protested, and argued for the NGO to be allowed to finish the statement. The US stated that it is the right of the NGO to speak, irrespective of whether or not the concerned State agrees with the statement. Support for this principle was expressed by the UK, France, Italy, Sweden and the Czech Republic. Eventually the NGO speaker was able to finish the statement.

While the support of some States for the right of NGOs to participate in Council sessions is welcome, these continuing attempts to restrict and undermine NGO space are worrying. Furthermore, States need to move beyond supporting NGO space or condemning attempts to restrict it, and ensure that they and their peers are taking steps to create and protect that space, both nationally and at the UN.

This is something that States failed to do during the debate on human rights bodies and mechanisms. If States are unable or unwilling to do this, then the UN needs to look elsewhere. A promising step in this direction comes in the draft text on reprisals, which includes a request to the Secretary-General to assign a UN-wide focal point on reprisals to work in particular with member States 'to promote prevention, protection and accountability for acts of reprisal and intimidation'.

It is to be hoped that such a function could achieve what member States have so been unable or unwilling to, which is to ensure that perpetrators are held to account, and to demand that States ensure protection for human rights defenders to carry out their legitimate work.

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