

Opinion: Council should not be a bystander on reprisals

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(Geneva) - Hungary has been running the resolution on the cooperation with the UN, its representatives and mechanisms in the field of human rights since 1992. The panel discussion on how to enhance cooperation within the UN to fight reprisals, held last September, opened a new chapter in this field, yielding several important proposals. In our resolution, just adopted by the Human Rights Council, we built upon its most important recommendations. The central tenet of our resolution was the proposal to appoint a senior focal point from within the UN system to coordinate a UN-wide response to reprisals in a systemic and coherent manner, to enhance their prevention and to promote protection against and accountability for these acts. By the adoption of our resolution, the Council managed to implement this most important recommendation coming out of the panel discussion.

We should make it clear that this is not a new mandate, as the focal point would be an existing high-level person within the UN system. He or she would be responsible for providing a unified and coordinated response from the UN system to all alleged cases of intimidation and reprisals, and his or her job would be wider than just cooperation with human rights mechanisms; it would also cover cooperation with other UN agencies and field operations. The focal point should in the future also serve as a reservoir of positive practices and lessons learned, so that all those who wish to address this phenomenon in a genuine manner may find some useful tools and ideas. It would also be useful in the future for the senior focal point to develop a toolbox not only for how to address most effectively the phenomenon of reprisals, but for creating the institutional guarantees and legal instruments to be established at the national level for their prevention.

We were particularly pleased that from the 68 cosponsors of the text, 27 are members of the Council, which shows that the majority of Council member States really see the need for this initiative and recognise that intimidation and reprisals against those who are cooperating with the UN can undermine the credibility and the proper functioning of the whole organisation. This resolution had the support of many delegations from all regional groups, and the wide co-sponsorship and support among African delegations is particularly welcome. This cross-regional support and cohesion might help us to make the resolution on this issue a consensual one in the future, as it has been the case thus far.

Given the importance and urgency of this issue, as underlined by the Secretary-General and the High Commissioner, proceeding with the speedy appointment of the senior focal point would solidify the results in the Council and send an encouraging message to civil society organisations and human rights defenders across the world that the UN is not simply a bystander when it comes to reprisals against those who seek to cooperate with its mechanisms.