

Statement at 25th session of the UN Human Rights Council

International Service for Human Rights, ISHR (ECOSOC Special Consultative Status)

Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative (ECOSOC Special Consultative Status), East and Horn of Africa Human Rights Defenders Project, EHAHRDP (ECOSOC Special Consultative Status), Human Rights House Foundation, HRHF (ECOSOC Special Consultative Status), International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission, IGLHRC (ECOSOC Special Consultative Status), World Organisation Against Torture, OMCT (ECOSOC General Consultative Status), Canadian HIV/AIDS Legal Network, Amnesty International.

Peace Brigades International (PBI) and Urgent Action Fund-Africa & Arc International support the views of this Statement.

Civil Society Space Panel

CHALLENGES AND PROPOSALS FOR STRENGTHENING CIVIL SOCIETY SPACE

Mr President,

Today, as the Council **recognises** the importance of civil society voices, we urge all States to do likewise.

Accusations that activism hinders progress or threatens security should not be tolerated. Questioning motives or methods of **protest** cannot justify a loss of rights. Laws restricting freedom of assembly - passed in Egypt, proposed in Spain - should be rescinded, whilst States must prevent and sanction the excessive use of force, of the kind seen recently in Venezuela and the Ukraine.

States should revoke **legislation** - like Ethiopia's - which criminalises NGOs on the basis of their funding or activities, and promote laws - like in Australia - which prohibit the State from doing just that. We urge the Council to condemn threatening legislation in countries including Nigeria, Uganda and Russia, which prohibit human rights advocacy relating to sexual orientation and gender identity.

States must **consult** civil society at the outset of policy development. Free, prior and informed consultation with communities affected by business projects can prevent conflict and violations. At the UN, civil society consultation is being stifled by repressive regimes through the ECOSOC Committee on NGOs. Pro-civil society States must respond to this, including by running for a seat on the Committee in April.

Mexico has shown good practise of how States should legislate to **protect** human rights defenders, but has also shown that good laws cannot be implemented without strong political backing, and that civil society space cannot be consolidated without impartial **investigations**

to bring perpetrators to justice.

Both States and non-state actors can play a role in protecting human rights defenders and civil society space at home and abroad. We therefore commend Switzerland on the development of its Guidelines on Human Rights Defenders. The development of National Action Plans on Business and Human Rights presents an important opportunity in this regard.

Finally: when States fail to guarantee civil society space, activists often turn to the UN. When that avenue too is closed by intimidation and violence, we must speak out. I close by urging the Council, and the UN as a whole, to ensure a stronger, practical response to **reprisals**, and thus lead by example in protecting civil society space.