

Statement at 28th session of the UN Human Rights Council

Item 2: Interactive Dialogue with the High Commissioner

ENSURING RESPECT FOR CIVIL SOCIETY AND DEMOCRATIC FREEDOMS

Mr President

[The rhetorical commitment to civil society, espoused by so many delegations during the High-Level Segment, is a stark contrast to the reality of the ‘trend of harsh restrictions on public freedoms by States across all regions’ exposed by the High Commissioner.]

ISHR shares the High Commissioner’s deep concern at the worsening use of counter-terrorism laws and measures to criminalise human rights defenders.

This trend is evident in all regions.

In Chile, the Anti-Terrorist Act has been used to prosecute indigenous activists campaigning against major development projects.

In China, a draft law defines ‘terrorism’ in such broad terms as to include ‘thought, speech or behavior’ that seeks to ‘influence national policy making’.

In Egypt, Law 8/2015, passed last week, allows the terrorist designation of individuals and associations which ‘infringe public order’ or ‘harm national unity’.

And in the United States, human rights groups have warned that efforts to combat extremism do not contain adequate human rights safeguards and that the imperative to counter-terrorism is being used by allied States such as Bahrain and Saudi Arabia to justify civil society repression.

These laws and measures are not only incompatible with human rights standards, but are also counterproductive.

Respect for the rights to freedom of expression, association, assembly, and public participation is axiomatic to the realization of our shared goals of good governance and national security. As over 30 major corporations wrote in a letter to the Cambodian Prime Minister following deadly attacks against protesting workers in 2014, respect for such rights is also a crucial factor contributing to investment and economic development. [States from Bangladesh to Myanmar should heed this message.]

Mr President, Mr High Commissioner, against these trends, ISHR welcomes a number of recent initiatives which show there is another way.

In Côte d’Ivoire, we welcome a national law on the protection of human rights defenders and urge its effective implementation.

In Finland, we welcome new guidelines on protecting human rights defenders through diplomatic missions and urge their principled and consistent application.

[In Ireland, we welcome the development of a National Action Plan on Business and Human Rights and urge the inclusion of concrete commitments to support corporate accountability activists.]

And in the US, we welcome the appointment of a Special Envoy on LGBT Rights and urge him to work in close partnership with local civil society to ensure positive local impact.

Finally, Mr President, we welcome the High Commissioner's strong focus on protecting civil society space and democratic freedoms and urge him to continue that vital work, without fear or favour.

Thank you.