

Statement at 30th session of the UN Human Rights Council

Item 2: General Debate with the High Commissioner

Thank you Mr President and Mr High Commissioner.

Today, 14 September, marks two years since Chinese human rights lawyer and defender Cao Shunli was disappeared in connection with her efforts to use this Council as a forum in which to expose human rights violations, promote good government, and exercise her fundamental right to freedom of expression.

Two years on, there been no proper investigation or accountability in relation to Cao's disappearance, detention and ultimate death. Instead, as outlined in your statement, hundreds of human rights defenders and lawyers in China have been arbitrarily detained in recent months and the State has enacted or is developing laws on national security, counter-terrorism and the regulation of NGOs that will further profoundly restrict civil society space. We call on States to follow your lead in ensuring that this unprecedented crackdown receives the significant attention at this session that it demands.

This regression in China is sadly emblematic of worsening attacks and restrictions on human rights defenders in many States and regions. While your statement lamented that there are too many examples to list, let me share a few.

In Bahrain, we are deeply concerned at the intensifying repression of human rights defenders, such as Zainab Al-Khawaja. While we welcome the joint statement on Bahrain delivered by Switzerland this morning, it needs to be followed by bilateral and multilateral action to ensure the swift release of political prisoners and all those detained in connection with exercising their rights to freedom of expression, public participation and protest.

In Cambodia, we call for the repeal of the recently enacted Law on Associations and NGOs and the substantial amendment of proposed laws on trade unions, cybercrimes and telecommunications. These laws are incompatible with both international human rights standards and with the national interest in a vibrant and independent civil society. The resolution negotiated at this session must reflect these realities.

Mr High Commissioner, as you identified in your opening statement, intimidation and reprisals against human rights defenders, witnesses and family members for their engagement with this Council and other UN mechanisms are an attack on individual human rights and on the institutional integrity of this body and the UN. Whilst we have not yet seen the Secretary-General's report, the joint communications report of the Special Procedures to be considered this session cites cases of arbitrary detention, travel bans and even torture

against those engaging with the Council and its mechanisms in States including Honduras, Kuwait, Oman, Saudi Arabia and Venezuela. Mr High Commissioner, we wish to hear your opinion on how States can be motivated to take the prompt, principled action required, both here in Geneva and in New York, to ensure a comprehensive, effective, system-wide response to these violations.

Thank you, Mr High Commissioner, for continuing to stand with civil society.