

## Human Rights Council 24th session

### ITEM 8 – GENERAL DEBATE ON FOLLOW-UP TO THE VIENNA DECLARATION AND PROGRAMME OF ACTION

#### *Check against delivery*

Thank you Mr President,

In this last Council session of the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary year of the Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action, it is timely to reflect on how the Council has taken stock of achievements and addressed challenges to implementation of the VDPA.

The VDPA recognises the important role of NGOs in promoting human rights and explicitly provides in Article 38 that ‘NGOs should be free to carry out their human rights activities, without interference’.

In that respect we welcome the affirmation in a draft resolution on civil society space at this Council session of the important role of civil society and in particular the to ‘right to unhindered access to and communication with’ the United Nations, its representatives and mechanisms.

However, it is seriously concerning that, at the same time, attacks, harassment, intimidation and reprisals against human rights defenders continue around the world and here in Geneva. We deeply regret that human rights defenders from China have been prevented from travelling to Geneva to participate in the work of the Council this session.

In the face of these setbacks, we are pleased to see States take up the issue of reprisals against those who cooperate with the UN human rights system. We look forward to the Council adopting a strong resolution on this subject and commend in particular, calls for States to adopt specific laws and policies to combat reprisals, and for the Secretary-General to appoint a UN-wide focal point to coordinate the UN’s response to reprisals.

We also look to the Council to ensure that States mentioned in the Secretary-General’s report inform the Council regularly and in a timely manner of steps taken to investigate cases of reprisals, prosecute perpetrators, and provide appropriate remedies to victims.

Other serious challenges to the full implementation of the VDPA remain, including efforts to narrow the scope of ‘universal human rights’. At this session, for example, we have heard some States refer to religious or cultural standards to justify limitations on human rights for groups including women.

The basic principles of non-discrimination and equality on which the UDHR is founded, and which are reaffirmed in the VDPA, are non-negotiable. No one can be denied the full protection of human rights standards on the basis of their identity. States must not be timid in defending those principles.

Thank you.