

Human Rights Watch, International Service for Human Rights (ISHR), Article 19, International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH), East Horn of Africa Human Rights Defenders Project (EHAHRDP) and The African Centre for Democracy and Human Rights Studies (ACDHRS) (joint statement)

Item 8 General Debate - VDPA

- delivered by John Fisher

The Vienna Declaration and Program of Action affirms the vital contribution of civil society to the realization of human rights.

It is therefore with dismay that we note a concerted pushback against civil society participation in countries and regions around the world.

We welcome the release in **Azerbaijan** last week of a number of human rights defenders, journalists and activists, who had been prosecuted on politically-motivated charges, while calling for continued international scrutiny to ensure the release of all those wrongfully detained.

Faced with a relentless crackdown on civil society in **China**, the joint statement adopted earlier this session breaks a significant taboo, provides hope to embattled human rights defenders, and underscores that no State, no matter how large or powerful, is beyond scrutiny.

In **Egypt**, we share the concerns expressed by the High Commissioner about the shrinking democratic space, misuse of overbroad counterterrorism laws, and increased crackdowns on civil society and human rights organizations.

The targeting and repression of Egyptian civil society organisations, particularly human rights organisations, has dramatically worsened over the last few weeks and months, and we are particularly concerned at reports that this crackdown continues to escalate, with the real risk of prosecution of the country's leading defenders and closure of the leading human rights organisations. This concern is based on a significant increase in State activity to restrict, criminalise and end their operations over the last six weeks, including:

- the summoning and threatened arrest and prosecution of staff of the Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies, Nazra for Feminist Studies and the United Group, for judicial questioning in relation to 'foreign funding';
- the imposition of arbitrary and unlawful travel bans and request for an asset freeze order to be issued by the Cairo Criminal Court against Gamal Eid, the Director of the Arab Network for Human Rights Information, and Hossam Bahgat, the founder and a Board member of the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights; and
- the closure of the Nadeem Center for Rehabilitation of Victims of Violence on 17 February.

The human rights movement in Egypt faces unprecedented risk, with the most credible and effective organisations facing closure and the most courageous and independent defenders facing the risk of charges that carry a sentence of life imprisonment. We call on the UN Human Rights Council together with democratic governments to condemn the current crackdown, and send a very clear message that any support for Egypt's government is conditional on respect for fundamental human rights.

We urge States and this Council to uphold the principles of the VDPA, and defend civil society organisations and human rights defenders from attack, at both the international and national levels.