

## ISHR and the struggle for a responsive international human rights system

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*By Chris Sidoti*



In early August 2014 an outspoken journalist and human rights advocate in the Maldives disappeared. It took the international human rights system two months to respond clearly and officially. He has still not been found. His disappearance is undoubtedly a reprisal for his human rights advocacy.

In early September the five Commissioners of the Maldives Human Rights Commission were dragged before the country's Supreme Court charged with treason because they had made a report to the Human Rights Council's Universal Periodic Review, in which they had quoted from a report by a UN Special Rapporteur. It took the international human rights system a month to respond. The charges are clearly reprisals for the Commission's engagement with the international human rights system itself. Even so, the system took a month to ensure a comprehensive formal reaction.

Why should human rights defenders look to the international human rights system, the United Nations, to support them in their work? If the UN is this dysfunctional, has the work of the International Service for Human Rights over the past 30 years been an abject failure?

I believe not, for the following reason.

Thirty years ago, there were few human rights defenders working internationally and barely the basics of an international human rights system. There were only four core human rights treaties and the oldest treaty monitoring committee had been working for less than 15 years. The first Special Procedures had been working for less than five years and there were only a couple of them. There was no UN High Commissioner for Human Rights and no Vienna Declaration and Program of Action, the basis for international human rights work for the

past 20 years.

ISHR was there from the beginning of the international human rights system, encouraging more people to act for human rights, supporting human rights defenders and advocating for an effective international system. Its founding father, Adrien-Claude Zoller, was a visionary with will and determination who saw what was needed and acted upon it.

Over the years ISHR has achieved much, not alone but in coalition with countless others. It has contributed to the enormous public activism for human rights that is now evident in, and on behalf of, every country on Earth. It has raised its voice constantly in support of human rights defenders, even achieving an international instrument that proclaims their rights - the Declaration on the Rights of Human Rights Defenders - and the appointment of a Special Rapporteur with key responsibilities for overseeing the implementation of the Declaration. It has contributed to the building of an international human rights system - inter-governmental bodies like the Human Rights Council, treaty bodies, Special Procedures and others - and ensured that human rights defenders have direct access to it at all points. In fact it has achieved what Mr Zoller set out to achieve and more.

ISHR has always worked on the front line where individual human rights defenders and their organisations meet the UN. It has encouraged and ensured that engagement, in the firm belief that each has much to offer to the other. However experience has demonstrated time and again - in cases such as the two from the Maldives - that human rights defenders do far more to benefit the UN than the UN does in return. Simply put, the UN needs human rights defenders far more than defenders need the UN. ISHR has worked hard to make the crucial contribution by defenders possible and it has succeeded. However, there remains much work to be done before the UN is able to respond effectively, as it ought to.

ISHR was established to be the defender of defenders. It has been so for thirty years and I am sure it will continue to be just that.

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