Mr Joachim Rücker, President of the Human Rights Council

Civil society is at the core of human rights and at the core of our work within the Human Rights Council. NGOs put issues on the agenda, provide vital information about human rights on the ground, and give a voice and face to human rights. NGOs assist to implement and monitor the implementation of the decisions and resolutions of the Council at the national level. NGOs are thereby often bridging the gap between the international, regional and national levels, by helping to translate our work into action, by triggering change, and by reminding us to strive for accountability.

For instance, without the pressure of civil society, the Commission of Inquiry on the Democratic Peoples’ Republic of Korea, enabling individuals to give the Human Rights Council their account of the human rights situation on the ground, would not have been possible. Other examples of human rights engagement include the Commission of Inquiry on Eritrea and the fact-finding mission of the OHCHR to Sri Lanka. NGOs also support raising awareness about important thematic issues, including on racism and discrimination, on new technologies, development, environment and the like. There is no country, and no human rights topic, in relation to which the work of NGOs is not vital.

As President of the Human Rights Council, I am therefore proud that in resolutions 60/251 and 5/1 our founding fathers and mothers laid the basis for civil society participation, asking the Council to ensure that civil society can participate in the most effective manner possible.

Regrettably, the work of NGOs and human rights defenders is often marked by major risks. The Special Rapporteur on Human Rights Defenders, a special procedure mandate established in 2000, has shed light on thousands of cases. The current mandate holder, Michael Forst, has rightly underlined that many human rights defenders face smear campaigns, intimidation, stigmatization, threats to their families, defamation, accusations, ridicule or red tape, and in some cases disappearances and even deaths, for and because of their cooperation with the United Nations.

Intimidation and attacks against NGOs and human rights defenders are unacceptable. As Council President, I am alarmed by the many cases of intimidation and attacks against those that seek to cooperate with the UN, in particular its human rights mechanisms. Such acts not only contradict the spirit of the United Nations and its functioning but also the principles and purposes of the UN Charter and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Therefore, a consistent approach by the United Nations, in particular the Human Rights Council, and by all of us vis-à-vis reprisals and intimidation is needed and accountability for each case is essential. Otherwise, the UN loses legitimacy.
Within the Council, we should collectively condemn reprisals, defend the right to cooperate freely with the United Nations and protect those targeted. It is encouraging that many States play an active and positive role in supporting NGOs and human rights defenders at the Human Rights Council and within the UN human rights system more broadly, but more needs to be done.

Furthermore, let me recall the words of the United Nations Secretary-General at the Human Rights Council panel on the protection of civil society space where he rightly said that ‘the space for civil society is a reflection of an entire society’s respect for human rights within its own borders and indeed around the globe’. Government-organized non-governmental organizations and legal, administrative and other restrictions, for instance on the basis of national security or public moral, restrict and impair the work of NGOs.

As President of the Council, I am guided by the growing body of resolutions and decisions of the Human Rights Council, including by its resolutions on human rights defenders and civil society space. I therefore urge States to fulfil their responsibilities vis-à-vis civil society.

To put it simply: Standing up for human rights, may they be political, civil, economic, social or cultural, is always the right thing to do.