

Statement at 40th session of the UN Human Rights Council

Item 2: Interactive Dialogue with the High Commissioner

Thank you Mr President.

Madame High Commissioner, we strongly endorse your view that respect for the work of human rights defenders is essential to address inequalities and ensure sustainable development.

The work of women human rights defenders is essential. Essential to combat violence and discrimination, and to promote gender equality.

The work of migrant rights defenders is essential. Essential to combat racism and xenophobia, and to ensure security and dignity for people seeking protection.

The work of economic and social rights defenders is essential. Essential to end poverty, and to ensure that every person has access to housing, healthcare, education and a decent job.

The work of environmental defenders is essential. Essential to ensure we can all breathe clean air, drink safe water and appropriately address climate change.

Madame High Commissioner, these truths should be uncontested and self-evident.

But in reality they are not.

As your statement reflects, women defenders are arbitrarily detained and tortured in Saudi Arabia. We welcome the joint statement led by Iceland in this regard and regret that States such as Switzerland prioritized political expediency and profit over their purported commitment to human rights defenders in failing to join.

Migrant rights defenders are criminalised in Europe and have been held in cruel and oppressive offshore detention centres by Australia.

Housing rights defenders have been subject to reprisals, including arbitrary evictions and home demolitions in Egypt.

And environmental defenders continue to be murdered in the Philippines and Brazil.

Madame High Commissioner, we urge you, without fear or favour, to expose the hypocrisy of States like China that espouse a commitment to sustainable development and then attack the very defenders whose work is essential to ensuring that no-one is left behind.

Supporting and protecting defenders must be a paramount priority for your Office and for all UN programmes and agencies, including through the development of a UN-wide policy. If we are to truly address inequalities and achieve sustainable development, then States and the UN alike must put 'Human rights defenders up front'.