

**64<sup>th</sup> session of the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights**

April 2019 – Sharm El Sheikh, Egypt

ITEM 3 – The situation of human rights in Africa

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Madam President, Honorable Commissioners, States Parties, Dear delegates,

ISHR takes this opportunity of the 64<sup>th</sup> session of the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights to raise its concerns about the human rights situation on the continent, and more specifically the situation of defenders.

Madam President, while the African Union has declared 2019 the year of refugees, returnees and displaced persons, the situation of defenders working for the promotion and protection of their rights is deteriorating.

In fact, having chosen to protect people often stigmatized and criminalized by their status, defenders are systematically subject to prosecution and restrictions because of their work. States are increasingly resorting to the worrying practice of requiring the activities of these defenders to be supervised and monitored by State authorities. In addition, because of the threats and intimidation they face in their countries, defenders may themselves be driven into exile and find themselves in a precarious situation making their work difficult.

This is the case of many Burundian defenders exiled in Uganda and Rwanda who continue to face major difficulties, such as obtaining funding without legal recognition for the activities of their organizations based in the host countries or the travel abroad to participate in advocacy missions. In addition, they continue to live in fear of attacks by the *Imbonerakure* youth militia and National Intelligence Service agents.

**We call on States Parties to ensure that national legislative and administrative provisions and their application facilitate the work of all actors who defend the fundamental rights of people on the move. We also call on them to ensure that all human rights defenders in exile benefit from the prohibition of refoulement to the danger of persecution, in accordance with the Convention relating to the Status of Refugees, other international instruments and customary international law.**

Madam President, we are currently holding this 64<sup>th</sup> session of the Commission in Egypt while the situation of human rights defenders in the country is worrying.

In recent years, the Egyptian authorities have relentlessly repressed non-governmental organizations, sued members of Egyptian organizations, frozen their assets, imposed travel bans and enacted the draconian law of 2017 allowing for increased monitoring of their activities and funding. In April 2018, the government announced that it would repeal this abusive law, but to date no new bill has been made public.

Since the re-election of President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi in March 2018, under the cover of the fight against terrorism, security forces have stepped up their campaign of intimidation, violence and arrests against political opponents and defenders who have issued criticisms, even slight, against the government.

**ISHR calls on the Egyptian government to end its campaign of repression against all human rights defenders working in the country.**

In addition, Egyptian human rights defenders have been victims of reprisals for cooperating with regional and international human rights mechanisms, including their special procedures. At the end of 2018, following a meeting with the Special Rapporteur on adequate housing during his official visit in Egypt, the Egyptian authorities arrested several of the participants.

Finally, Madam President, it is important to bring to your attention the difficulties faced by defenders present at this session, as well as those who have not been able to be with us today. Indeed, a significant number of defenders have been denied their visa applications to Egyptian delegations present in their countries. You will note the exceptional nature of this session in that a very small number of side events could be organized. This is not due to a lack of will but more to a lack of possibility. Indeed, whether it be the exorbitant prices offered in these premises and despite the relentless efforts of some, it was difficult to find a hotel in the area accepting to rent one of its meeting rooms in order for us to freely enjoy our freedom of assembly.

**We remind the government of Egypt that the right to travel to participate in sessions of international and regional bodies for the promotion and protection of human rights is guaranteed by the United Nations Declaration on Human Rights Defenders. Therefore, we call on the Commission to investigate cases of refusal of visas brought to its attention and to ensure a safe environment for defenders at its ordinary sessions.**

I thank you.