

PROMOTING ACCOUNTABILITY FOR VIOLATIONS

We use the UN and regional human rights bodies to prevent, expose, remedy and seek accountability for attacks and restrictions against human rights defenders.

Securing the release of human rights defenders from arbitrary detention



In many countries arbitrary detention of human rights defenders is used both to prevent and punish their vital work. From social media activist Nabeel Rajab in Bahrain, to rights lawyer Wang Yu in China, to democracy campaigner Razan Zaitouneh in Syria, defenders frequently face arbitrary arrest and detention, often incommunicado, in connection with their work. In such cases, the use by NGOs of UN and regional human rights bodies as platforms from which to call for freedom and forums within which to lobby and mobilise influential States to speak out, can make the difference between a defender being arbitrarily detained or allowed to walk free.

Working in coalition with other NGOs such as Amnesty, Human Rights Watch and FIDH, ISHR's international advocacy – including press statements, open letters, urgent appeals, and closed door lobbying – helped ensure that a number of defenders walked free in 2015: women human rights defenders Azza Soliman and Yara Sallam and independent journalist Hossam Baghat in Egypt, minority rights campaigner Nawaf Al-Hendal in Kuwait, former ISHR trainee Mohammed Al-Maskati in Bahrain, and anti-corruption activist Rafael Marques in Angola, to name a few.

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‘The campaigns around individual cases by some international organisations helped a lot to keep such issues alive. I myself was a direct beneficiary of such a campaign, and am certain that the immediate and intense campaigning around the world was a crucial element that brought about my release a couple of days after being detained under the anti-terror laws, in March 2014.’

Ruki Fernando, Sri Lankan human rights defender and participant in ISHR's convening in October 2015



Flickr, Maina Kiai



ISHR in the news: Syria: Disclose whereabouts of detained freedom of expression advocate', *The Syrian Observer*, 8 October 2015



ISHR in the news: Sui-Lee Wee and Stephanie Nebehay, 'At UN, China uses intimidation tactics to silence its critics', *Reuters*, 6 October 2015



Countering the civil society crackdown in China



2015 bore witness to the most sustained and targeted crackdown against the human rights movement in China in recent history, with NGOs forced to close down, repressive national security and counter-terrorism legislation adopted, and over 300 human rights defenders harassed, detained or disappeared.

Building on our decade-long relationship with Chinese Human Rights Defenders, ISHR worked throughout the year to advise, protect and support defenders within the country, and to use the international platforms available to raise awareness of the crackdown and increase its political cost to China. In August, ISHR coordinated an open letter and briefing to States in Geneva on the human rights situation in China, on behalf of Chinese Human Rights Defenders, Human Rights in China, Human Rights Watch and FIDH, among others. Subsequently, at the September session of the Human Rights Council, a record number of States – including the United States, the United Kingdom, Switzerland and Germany – expressed grave concern about the human rights situation in the country, while the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Zeid Ra'ad al Hussein condemned the widespread crackdown in his opening statement to the session.

In addition to using the Council to increase pressure on China, ISHR played a key role in supporting Chinese activists to give evidence to the UN Committee against Torture. We informed and influenced the report of that Committee through advocacy and a major report of our own. In line with ISHR submissions and advocacy, the Committee's Concluding Observations issued in November expressed dismay at 'consistent reports that human rights defenders and lawyers, petitioners, political dissidents and members of religious or ethnic minorities continue to be charged, or threatened to be charged, with broadly-defined offences as a form of intimidation'. The Committee called on China to ensure that such broadly-defined offences as 'picking quarrels and provoking troubles' or 'gathering a crowd to disturb social order' are not used or abused to restrict or prosecute 'human rights defenders, lawyers, petitioners and others for their legitimate activities'. As well as addressing systemic issues, and again as pressed by ISHR, the Committee also called on China to conduct transparent and impartial investigations and ensure accountability in individual cases of reprisals against human rights defenders, including lawyer and ISHR trainee Cao Shunli. 14 March 2016 marks the second anniversary of Cao Shunli's death in Chinese custody and ISHR will continue to press for justice in her case.



'We have used international and regional human rights systems and standards to document, expose, denounce and seek accountability for human rights violations and to seek resolutions and recommendations for national-level human rights reform. Used and leveraged effectively, the outputs of international mechanisms can contribute to change on the ground and, in many cases in our countries, have been essential elements of such change. In the context of particularly restrictive States – such as China – the mechanisms themselves may also provide a platform for the empowering exercise of fundamental rights to freedom of expression, association and dissent that is not possible or is even criminalised at the national level.'

Communique from a group of 15 human rights defenders working in highly restrictive and dangerous environments (October 2015)



Ensuring violations are documented, exposed and pursued in Burundi



Throughout the second half of 2015, the human rights situation in Burundi deteriorated significantly, with opposition activists, independent journalists, human rights defenders and their family members murdered and disappeared. Government forces responded violently to peaceful protesters and forced the closure of independent media outlets.

ISHR was one of the first NGOs to call attention to this deteriorating situation at a special informal meeting of the Human Rights Council in May. Informed by our partners on the ground – some of whom are former ISHR trainees – ISHR used the Council to call on Burundian authorities to end attacks against defenders, journalists and peaceful protesters and restore respect for the rule of law. As the situation worsened, ISHR joined a group of 10 other leading NGOs – including FIDH, Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, and the East and Horn of Africa Human Rights Defenders Project – in calling on States to convene a special, emergency session of the Council to address the rapidly deteriorating human rights situation and prevent further atrocities in Burundi. The December 2015 Special Session of the Council, which culminated in the adoption of a strong resolution mandating the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights to deploy a mission of independent experts to visit the country to investigate human rights violations, represents an important step to ensuring greater accountability in Burundi.



Staff, panelists and participants at a discussion co-hosted by ISHR on the human rights situation in Burundi. Geneva, December 2015



Following civil society pressure, the UN Human Rights Council held an emergency session on Burundi. Geneva, December 2015. Flickr, UN Geneva



'I was struck by the impact of civil society concerning the grave human rights situation in Burundi, which was a real test case of the Council's ability to act preventively. The joint letter you sent to our governments requesting a special session on Burundi helped to move the lines and to raise awareness among members and observers of the Council. This led ultimately to a strong and decisive resolution, which includes the decision to send an expert mission to the country.'

Bertrand de Crombrughe, *Ambassador and Permanent Representative of Belgium and Vice-President of the UN Human Rights Council*



UN Photo, Jean-Marc Ferré



ISHR in the news: 'Regional Indigenous activists slam corporate abuses at IACHR', TelesUR, 21 October 2015

Coordinating action at the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights to protect land and environment defenders



Defenders of land and environment rights, together with those who work to oppose major development projects, are among the most exposed and at risk in the world. The situation is particularly acute in the Americas, which leads the world when it comes to the criminalisation, surveillance, kidnapping and even murder of indigenous rights campaigners, land and environment activists, and others who protest business activities.

In response to this worsening situation, in 2015 ISHR convened a coalition of 39 national, regional and international NGOs to push for the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights to hold its first-ever dedicated public hearing on the role of businesses in violations against land and environment rights defenders. The bid was successful and the public hearing was an opportunity for defenders and victims to testify to the Commissioners in Washington DC and articulate the steps and measures that States, business enterprises and other actors must take to ensure a safe and enabling environment for their vital work. Calling the failure of governments to ensure accountability and an end to impunity for attacks a 'total disgrace', the President of the Commission pledged to make the protection of land and environment defenders and corporate accountability activists an 'absolute priority' for the Commission's work.



'Our broad coalition presented evidence to the Commission of a pattern of attacks against defenders of the rights of land, territory and the environment across the Americas, with examples of clear collusion between businesses, the State and even organised crime groups aimed at silencing defenders.'

Ben Leather, *ISHR Advocacy Manager*

*María Isabel Jiménez,
Asamblea de los
Pueblos del Sur, testifies
at a public hearing on
the role of business
in violations against
land and environmental
human rights defenders,
at the Inter-American
Commission on Human
Rights. Washington, October
2015. Flickr, Daniel Cima,
Comisión Interamericana de
Derechos Humanos*

