
Human Rights Council: Report of the Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights Defenders

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Written by: Tshepo Tlhacoane

The Human Rights Council convened for its 61st session in Geneva between 23 February and 31 March 2026. Agenda item 3 discussed the [report](#), *Defending Dignity and Claiming Rights: Human Rights Defenders Hold Firm to Universal Values as Others Desert Them*, pursuant to resolution 52/4. The report, presented by the Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights Defenders, relied on submissions from 300 human rights defenders in 82 countries and territories, and investigates their motivation for defending human rights, the challenges they face, and the report examines the effectiveness and efficiency of the international mechanisms in supporting human rights defenders.

ACHRS concerns ourselves with this report as it aligns with our third [priority](#), the right to speak, which aims to defend the freedom of expression and opinion of media professionals and human rights activists.

The report is presented in a climate where states undermine their human rights obligations and where, according to the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, at least 625 human rights defenders and journalists were killed or disappeared in 2024. An additional and unexpected challenge faced by human rights defenders is the impact of funding cuts to the human rights ecosystem in 2024 and 2025, which have resulted in human rights defenders feeling less safe, less able to do their work, and less able to deliver on the promises of human rights.

Motivation and Spirit

In their defence of human rights, human rights defenders are often accused of promoting a foreign agenda, imposing foreign values, or collaborating with foreign entities. In the report, the Special Rapporteur, based on the abovementioned submissions, was able to articulate three main reasons that draw human rights defenders to this line of work.

Personal Injustice: Oftentimes, what motivates human rights defenders to begin this work is not an understanding of international law or human rights norms and standards, but as a reaction to witnessing an injustice. Only after does the vocabulary of international human rights law connect them to a global movement. A common entry point for these people is when they, or their family members, experience a human rights violation, and the subsequent efforts to obtain justice are unsuccessful.

Systematic Violations: The next motivator is witnessing systemic violations and the negative impact that this has on society. From witnessing arbitrary arrests and detentions, to systematic violations to a clean and healthy environment, this group of people are motivated by the impact that the human rights violations have on the community as a whole.

Systematic Oppression: A third and final motivator is seeing the oppression or discrimination of members of society based on who they are. This is the case in the fight for Indigenous People's rights, women's rights defenders, and people working for the rights of migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers.

The Special Rapporteur wants states to know that human rights defenders are not drawn to this work because they are beholden to 'western ideology' or are 'extremists,' as they are so often accused of being. They are drawn to this work due to injustices in their own countries and their belief in the dignity of every person.

Occupational Risks

Human rights defenders face many risks in doing their work, and these include being killed, death threats, physical assault, extortion, kidnapping, and torture.

Despite the risks, human rights defenders continue their work and oftentimes receive the support of the community who hope that change can occur by sharing their stories.

Funding Cuts and Restrictions

The funding cuts by states in 2024 and 2025 significantly impacted the human rights ecosystem, adversely impacting 77% of respondents in the previous 12 months. These cuts have had numerous consequences, and the report outlines five main consequences of funding cuts.

Reduced Emergency Assistance: Human rights organizations often intervene to protect people at immediate risk due to their human rights work. This protection takes the form of temporary relocation, medical assistance, and travel and accommodation costs. The lack of funding prevents these emergency interventions for human rights defenders.

Reduced Provisions for Psychosocial Support: Organizations have been forced to reduce or cancel psychosocial support for defenders, victims of violations, and the community at large. A woman-led organization in Afghanistan offers an example of this, as the lack of funding severely limited their ability to offer support for women and children who were under severe psychological pressure due to deprivation, violence, discrimination and social crises.

Reduced Capacity to Provide Legal Aid: Accountability efforts are constrained due to lack of funding as the ability to provide free legal aid to other human rights defenders is reduced.

Reduced Capacity for Outreach, Monitoring and Documentation, Particularly in Isolated, Remote, and Rural Contexts: In her 2025 report to the Human Rights Council, the Special

Rapporteur noted that human rights defenders in rural areas lacked support mechanisms, transportation links, media coverage, local police presence, internet access, and appropriate service providers. Some of these are being widened by funding cuts which reduce the capacity of defenders to monitor, document, and carry out training outside of major cities,

Reduced Capacity to Promote Women’s Rights: Defenders of women’s rights have also been adversely impacted by funding cuts. Their ability to raise awareness and empower has been impacted, especially in a climate where there is an increase in the backlash against women’s rights globally.

Mitigation of Funding Cuts

Human rights defenders have relied on various tactics to overcome funding cuts, from using free online tools, including artificial intelligence, to assist with the workload, while others have transformed in-person workshops into online clinics which are recorded for later use.

These efforts are often short-term measures and are not sustainable, more so when combined with the increased workloads that people have to take on to cover gaps as a result of funding cuts. The Special Rapporteur is concerned that human rights defenders face exhaustion and stress-related mental health issues. The report discusses four measures taken to mitigate funding cuts.

Prioritizing Most Essential Programmes: A common tactic has been a reduction of services offered by defenders and organizations.

Building Solidarity and Expanding Outreach: Funding cuts have led to the collaboration of human rights organizations and defenders across thematic lines, leading to broader-based alliances.

Diversification of Funding Sources: To counterbalance the loss of funding, human rights defenders apply for emergency funding, amounts significantly lower than needed, in order to address immediate challenges. The large numbers of people adopting a similar strategy has resulted in a low success rate. Others have turned to crowdfunding or community-based fundraising.

Income Generating Projects: Some organizations have trialled income-generating initiatives such as ecological farming, selling online training courses, and mixing *pro bono* work on human rights cases with corporate work.

International Human Rights Standards and Mechanisms

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights along with the nine core international human rights conventions continue to set standards into practical rights for communities to claim, such as the right to clean water and a healthy environment. They also provide legitimacy for human rights defenders whose legitimacy is often challenged, and they provide a common language with governments for accountability and justice.

As states fail to protect human rights, human rights defenders are increasingly turning to international mechanisms for support. The Special Rapporteur highlights that international mechanisms should not be considered a one-stop shop, and should instead be seen as being part of a wider advocacy and protection toolbox that human rights defenders can rely on. The report provided positive and negative experiences by defenders with international mechanisms.

Positive Experiences

In contexts where the space to work is constricted, the capacity of human rights mechanisms to monitor and report on human rights violations was welcomed. These bodies are key in these

contexts as they can speak on behalf of victims of human rights violations. They carry moral authority, but can also influence courts and advocacy strategies.

When international human rights bodies raise cases of targeted human rights defenders in reports, communications, or public statements, it can lead to the reduction of harassment or attacks against them. Additionally, communication or country visits by leaders of international mechanisms provide credibility and legitimacy for human rights defenders.

Shortcomings

Although there have been improvements in recent years, human rights defenders have struggled to gain access to international human rights mechanisms. Multiple submissions described the process as technical and bureaucratic and called for simpler procedures to make them more inclusive.

Other defenders were critical of the limited number of languages in which complaints were accepted, and called for secure online translation services. Further submissions highlighted the lack of knowledge on how to engage with the mechanisms.

Delays in receiving a response, or the absence of a response were major shortcomings in the submissions. Delays were caused by numerous factors by all parties, including delays in communication by the Special Rapporteur, failure to provide express consent of the victim by defenders at the time of making complaint, and submissions which do not contain all the important information and evidence.

Many defenders believe that international mechanisms are severely undermined by the lack of enforcement measures, something which is particularly noticeable in conflict and post-conflict settings. Furthermore, once an action has been taken by a mechanism, the lack of feedback to the victims of the violation, or the lack of follow-up with the relevant government was also criticized

by human rights defenders. There have been calls to develop a complaint-tracking system, so that defenders can verify whether their cases have been received, reviewed, and acted upon.

Local organizations are the most immediate and practical support available to human rights defenders when they're in danger. However, there is oftentimes a lack of knowledge on the local level on how to access and use these mechanisms. Conversely, the distance between Geneva-based mechanisms and local human rights defenders is lengthened due to the lack of capacity that the mechanism has to conduct outreach.

A final shortcoming are the acts of intimidation and reprisals that human rights defenders face when interacting with international mechanisms. As was mentioned above, human rights defenders are often accused of collaborating with foreign entities, and are thus subjected to threats or acts of violence when they interact with international mechanisms. Human rights defenders expressed frustration that responses to reprisals were limited to statements or inclusion in the Secretary General's annual reprisals [report](#), without further action.

Reflections

ACHRS welcomes the report by the Special Rapporteur, and thanks the Human Rights Council for providing the platform to address challenges faced by human rights defenders. It is regrettable that funding cuts for human rights programmes are occurring at a time when there is a pushback on international law and the international human rights regime.

At ACHRS, we advocate for human rights because we believe in the inherent equality and dignity of all persons, and we believe that the realization of all human rights will lead to the best life for people, both as individuals and collectively as a society. We stand in solidarity with all human rights defenders and encourage them to persevere through these difficult times in order to

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استثنائي خاص لدى جانزون على جائزة الأمم المتحدة لحقوق
الإنسان لعام ٢٠٢٣

see the society that they have sacrificed for: a society full of freedoms and opportunities, and free of all forms of occupation, oppression, and subjugation.

ACHRS will continue to monitor the proceedings at the Human Rights Council, and report on developments related to our priorities and those of countries in the Arab Region. ACHRS will provide a more comprehensive analysis of the reports at the conclusion of the 61st session of the Human Rights Council.