



DEFENDDEFENDERS

East and Horn of Africa Human Rights Defenders Project

UN rights council affirms unwavering support for human rights defenders

Geneva-Kampala, 22 June 2020 — As human rights defenders (HRDs) in the East and Horn of Africa and around the world face increasing risks, the United Nations' (UN) main human rights body, the Human Rights Council, has extended the mandate of its top expert on HRDs, the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders, for three years.

“By renewing the Special Rapporteur’s mandate, the Council affirmed unwavering support for human rights defenders,” said Hassan Shire, Executive Director, DefendDefenders. **“It is high time for all States to prioritise support to, and protection of, HRDs, including those who are particularly at risk: women defenders, indigenous defenders, and defenders of the rights of minorities.”**

Beyond extending the Special Rapporteur’s mandate, the resolution adopted by the Council today reiterates grave concern with regard to “the serious risks faced by [HRDs] due to threats, attacks, reprisals and acts of intimidation against them” and over the fact that “national security and counter-terrorism legislation and other measures, such as laws regulating civil society organisations, have been misused to target human rights defenders.” It strongly urges all States to take concrete steps to create, “in law and in practice, a safe and enabling environment in which [HRDs] can operate free from hindrance and insecurity.”

“We welcome the fact that the resolution was adopted by consensus – that is, without any opposition,” said Nicolas Agostini, Representative to the UN for DefendDefenders. **“States should now walk the talk and fully implement all provisions of UN resolutions on HRDs, as well as the 1998 UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders.”**

Ahead of the Council’s 43rd session (24 February-20 March 2020; resumed 15-23 June 2020¹), DefendDefenders joined a large group of NGOs in [calling](#)² on members and observers of the Council to renew the mandate of the Special Rapporteur by consensus. We advocated for this outcome and encouraged States to support the resolution, drafted by Norway, at an early stage and to oppose any attempt to dilute the mandate or State obligations with regards to HRDs.

On 13 March 2020, Mary Lawlor, former Director of Amnesty International Ireland, founder of Front Line Defenders, and a long-time friend and partner of DefendDefenders, was appointed Special Rapporteur on the situation of HRDs, “given her knowledge, expertise and practical approach related to the mandate, as well as her commitment to engage with a variety of stakehol-

¹ Due to the COVID-19 situation, the session was suspended on 13 March 2020. It decided to “extend all mandates and mandated activities that would otherwise expire, until the date on which they can be considered by the Council when the 43rd session is resumed.” The Council resumed its work on 15 June 2020 and started adopting resolutions on 19 June 2020.

² DefendDefenders, “DefendDefenders joins call to renew the mandate of the top UN expert on human rights defenders,” <https://defenddefenders.org/defenddefenders-joins-call-to-renew-the-mandate-of-the-top-un-expert-on-human-rights-defenders/> (accessed on 22 June 2020).



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ders.”³ She succeeds Michel Forst, whose work over the last six years (2014-2020) DefendDefenders warmly welcomes.

For more information, please contact:

Hassan Shire

Executive Director, the East and Horn of Africa Human Rights Defenders Project on HassanS@defenddefenders.org or +256 772 753 753 (English and Somali)

Nicolas Agostini

Representative to the United Nations (Geneva), the East and Horn of Africa Human Rights Defenders Project on NicolasA@defenddefenders.org or +41 79 813 49 91 (English and French)

³ UN Human Rights Council, “Appointments to be made at the 43rd session of the Human Rights Council (24 February - 20 March 2020): President’s list of 21 February 2020 with the candidates proposed for appointment by the Human Rights Council,” <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/HRC/SP/Pages/HRC43.aspx> (accessed on 11 March 2020).