

## **Panel on the judicial persecution of Human Rights Defenders 71<sup>st</sup> ACHPR Session**

**Mr. Hassan Shire**, Executive Director of the DefendDefenders and Chairperson of AfricanDefenders

### ***Judicial harassment of Human Rights Defenders and the Ubuntu Hub Cities initiative (7 minutes)***

**Hon. Chairperson,**

**Hon. Commissioners**

**Member States represented to this Ordinary Session**

**Ladies and Gentlemen**

As human rights defenders we strive for the protection of rights and fundamental freedom. We speak truth to power to illustrate the failures of some governments or state authorities to fulfil their obligation in protecting the human and people's rights.

However, in most cases, their denunciations and for accountability or call to end impunity are seen and met with confrontation, repression, physical attacks, and sometime reprisal for engaging with the African Commission special mechanisms. The various resolutions passed by this August house is sufficient evidence of the scope of attack against HRDs.

The current trend across the African continent is the manipulation of the judicial system as weapon of repression to suppress and silence HRDs.

The misuse of the legal system open doors to anarchism to assert their authority over the democratic process, limit civil society participation and undermining the rule of law in a democracy, as consequence, we note **breakdown of democracy and rule of law**

The judicial persecution of HRDs have as consequence **an increased exposure to physical attack** leading often to forms of repression such as threats, intimidation, surveillance, and physical violence.

Allegations often aim to stigmatise HRDs in the public imagination as 'troublemakers', 'criminals', or 'terrorists', and such labels create the perception that HRDs "hinder the development of society and deserve persecution" and to be dealt with as criminals. This has led to acts of aggression and even assassination of HRDs.

Furthermore, the strategy of criminalisation aims to tarnish the reputation of the HRD and their organisation, thereby seeking to negate any support they may receive.

In doing so, those actors are seeking to **undermine the legitimacy and credibility of NGOs** or jeopardise access to important political spaces; as well as weakening **the human rights movement**, trigger **psychological distress and family breakdown** for the family and cripple the financial and administrative operations of NGOs through malicious allegations.

Such practices have led HRDs to flee their country, some time render them in a state of vulnerability.

Once in exile, many HRDs become stranded in a cycle of poverty that causes HRDs to end their activism, as they struggle to survive without sustainable livelihoods or financial support for their human rights work. Threats persist from their home governments and many face pervasive security risks.

Exile can be a traumatising experience for many HRDs, and if authoritative governments continue to tighten their grip on fundamental freedoms, the flow of activists fleeing their home countries will only increase.

Through our protection work, we recognise the unique challenges facing HRDs in exile and their need for additional support, coordination, and advocacy to address this gap. Overtime we have observed a mass exodus of from various countries in Africa.

In the quest to address this situation DefendDefenders and Africandefenders have therefore established in 7 cities in Africa the Ubuntu Hub City Initiatives. established.

A holistic African based relocation and emergency support programme. The main objective of the Ubuntu Hub Cities initiative is to ensure the safety, physical and mental well-being of HRDs during their relocation period while allowing them to continue their work. They are Safe but not silent.

Through local partnerships, relocation also provides an opportunity for HRDs at risk to learn and share their experiences, so that they can have a positive impact on the host community and return home with greater capacity to protect and promote human rights.

**I Thank you for you attention**