

**East and Horn of Africa Human Rights Defenders Network (EHAHRD-Net)**  
**4<sup>th</sup> General Assembly**  
**Mestil Hotel and Residences, Kampala Uganda**

**Final Communiqué**

1. The East and Horn of Africa Human Rights Defenders Network (EHAHRD-Net) held its fourth General Assembly from 6 to 7 October 2022 at the Mestil Hotel and Residences in Kampala, Uganda. The General Assembly (GA) brought together 75 development partners, representatives from national coalitions of human rights defenders (HRDs), country focal points and HRDs from Burundi, Ethiopia, Kenya, South Sudan, Somalia (including Somaliland), Sudan, Tanzania, and Uganda.
2. Director Programs and Administration at DefendDefenders (East and Horn of Africa Human Rights Defenders Project), Ms. Memory Bandera moderated the opening session and welcomed participants, recognising the presence of Mr. Hassan Shire, Executive Director DefendDefenders, Mr. Vital Nshimirimana, Chairperson EHAHRD-Net (in absentia), Mr. Peter Kamalingin, Pan Africa Director Oxfam International, Ms. Sophie Kyagulanyi, Chairperson DefendDefenders' Board of Directors, heads of national coalitions of human rights defenders, development partners, and all participants in their respective capacities.
3. In his welcome remarks delivered virtually, Vital Nshimirimana contrasted the worrying and positive human rights developments in some countries of the East and Horn of Africa sub-region. He noted the peaceful transition of power following recent elections in Kenya and Somalia. He emphasized the value of networking and solidarity in such challenging contexts. Additionally, he called upon all participants present to participate in the election at the end of the GA to appoint a new Chairperson and appreciated the opportunity the EHAHRD-Net accorded him as Chairperson for the past 5 years.
4. In his capacity as Executive Director of DD Chairperson of the Pan African Human Rights Defenders Network (AfricanDefenders), Mr. Shire noted that this GA coincided with the 35<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights (ACHPR) and was thus a call to reflect on past efforts, scrutinize lessons learnt, and adapt to global intersecting crises impacting food security, health, education, environment, peace, and security. He expressed hope on Burundi, and urged the government to initiate a comprehensive reform that may improve the situation of human rights in the country. Mr. Shire further illuminated the assembly with the milestone achievements made by DefendDefenders (EHAHRD-Net Secretariat) over the past five years (2017-2022), by providing protection support to 3,681 HRDs across the sub-region, as well as registering a notable increase in the number of women human rights defenders (WHRDs) accessing protection interventions.
5. Ms. Sophie Kyagulanyi noted that the GA is an important governance structure and the highest decision-making body of the secretariat. She appreciated the leadership of Mr. Shire and his staff who have steered the secretariat to become a frontline player in the protection of HRDs on the continent. She urged EHAHRD-Net to pay attention to emerging trends, critically think through possible strategies to enhance protection of HRDs and look out for opportunities for constructive dialogue with state actors. She therefore called on the participants to fully engage during the review and updating of the Plan of Action. Finally, as the Board Chairperson, she pledged to continue providing strategic guidance and leadership to the Secretariat and ensuring that it continues to adhere to the laws of our host country Uganda.

6. On behalf of Amnesty International-Eastern Africa Office, Mr. Christian Rumu delivered a lightening talk, where he emphasised three key points that the GA should take note of. (i) Solidarity: drawing on the 2015 Burundi crisis, Rumu revealed the importance of the network that mobilised and ensured that HRDs continued their work even while in exile. Solidarity was extended to marginalised groups including queer groups thus enhancing their protection. (ii) Inclusion and expansion of the Network: to be inclusive and pay particular attention to other groups of HRDs including those who defend rights of indigenous people; young people working on climate change and digital rights; and those championing the workers' rights movement. (iii) Resilience: to adopt new ways of working and organising to combat negative narratives of state actors in the sub-region against HRDs.
7. Mr. Peter Kamalingin in his keynote address noted that the General Assembly provides opportunities for comrades and movements to meet, reflect and share experiences while strengthening solidarity. He recalled the history of the African Union (AU) initially Organisation of African Unity including its milestones and challenges. He highlighted the disconnect between the AU and its citizens which has led to a return of military coups, persistent injustices, and poverty. He pointed out that the AU adopted an ambitious Agenda 2063 in 2013 that brings a sense of hope to enhancing human dignity and fostering peace.

To that effect, He noted the important step by the AU to embark on the reforms to make it more efficient and effective to meet the need of African Citizens. He emphasized the importance of the African Human rights architecture, particularly the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights (ACHPR), which has increased the AU's capacity and provides opportunities for engagement for both human rights defenders and African States. Mr. Kamalingin further proposed pay particular attention and reflect on to the second generation of human rights, for instance human security, food security and pandemics; adequately demonstrate the indivisibility of civil and political from the economic social and cultural rights; understanding the complexities and characters in African states and to broaden partnerships; and stronger partnership with the regional economic communities such as EAC and IGAD.

8. Following the opening ceremony, a panel discussion comprised of Mr. Kamau Ngugi Head of Defenders Coalition Kenya, Mr. Onesmo Olengurumwa Head of Tanzania Human Rights Defenders Coalition (THRDC), Ms. Mahlet Abreham Program Director of Ethiopia Human Rights Defenders Centre and Ms. Eulalie Nibizi Head of the Burundian Coalition of HRDs. was convened to deliberate on the complex working environment for HRDs moderated by Estella Kabachwezi, Advocacy, Research and Communication Manager at DefendDefenders.

Mr. Ngugi highlighted August 2022 elections in Kenya; the situation of Kenyan HRDs during the electoral process, and the meaning of this transition to Kenyan HRDs and people in the medium to long-term. Among other issues, he explored the role played by HRDs in sensitizing Kenyans on safeguarding democratic ideals, mobilisation of HRDs on common interest as opposed to tribal grounds, the challenges faced by marginalised groups in exercising their right to vote; the role of internet service providers in truth telling, as well as opportunities and fears presented by the new government.

Mr. Olengurumwa discussed the positive developments in Tanzania relating to media reform and amendment of restrictive laws. He discussed the challenges faced by land rights activists and those working to protect environmental rights. He however noted that the political will of the President is not enough to bring about the desired change. He emphasised the need for all state officials to share the President's perspective on human rights issues.

Ms. Abreham deliberated on the expansive conflict in Ethiopia that started in the northern region of the country but has since spread to the Afar and Oromia regions, focusing on its impact on WHRDs. She noted that WHRDs are affected disproportionately as they are targeted for revenge and used as weapons of war. Among the specific challenges faced by WHRDs, she highlighted, limited to no support for mental health for survivors of sexual violence; the exclusion of women from decision-making spaces; and digital and physical harassment.

Ms. Nibizi, an exiled WHRD from Burundi who fled the country's 2015 conflict discussed the situation and working environment for exiled HRDs. She pointed out the persistent challenges faced by HRDs in Burundi including closed media space and continued targeting of journalists. Despite the recent political developments, she insisted that the changes are yet to trickle down and materialize positively.

Ms. Kabachwezi opened the floor for a plenary discussion inviting participants to contribute to the discussion. Questions raised from the plenary included, what lessons can countries like South Sudan draw from Kenya's peaceful elections; whether digital attacks against HRDs tend to materialize into physical attacks, and whether they influenced the silencing of HRDs; the role of the AU in addressing the political and human rights crises on the continent; the sustainability of emergency protection interventions particularly for WHRDs; and how HRDs can operate within the context of shrinking civic space. Mr. Hassan Shire closed the panel discussion noting that there is need to follow up on relevant political commitments by Heads of State to ensure that political will for change is felt at the lowest level in society. He noted that dialogue by diplomatic missions needs to commence in the case of Burundi to assess the situation of HRDs in the country and suggest implementable recommendation for safe legal and working environment in the country. He called on exiled HRDs to always be hopeful that they will return to their home countries.

9. The agenda continued with a presentation by Ms. Bandera who made a presentation on the status of the Plan of Action over the last five years. She highlighted the strategies taken by the secretariat to enhance capacities of HRDs and effort deployed on policy changes and work on social and political working environment for the protection of HRDs. She noted that a total of 4,348 HRDs had received capacity enhancement.
10. Following the presentation by Ms. Bandera, Ms. Tabitha Netuwa DefendDefenders' Senior Protection and Security Management Manager moderated a review of the Plan of Action, considering the current context and human rights developments in the sub-region. Participants were divided into groups to discuss concerns related to capacity of HRDs; the legal environment; political environment; and psychosocial environment within which they operate. Additionally, participants suggested strategies to address the discussed concerns.
11. On 7 October, the General Assembly opened a discussion on the amendments to the Plan of Action following the previous day's review. Several recommendations and strategies were raised by the GA delegates including on incorporation of young people, limitations of resources, lack of specific laws that recognise and protect HRDs, among others. Mr. Shire called for adoption of the Plan of Action with amendments for 2022 to 2027. The motion was moved, seconded, and subsequently the Plan of Action was adopted with a recommendation to set up a committee to restructure the document without amending its substance.
12. The election of a new Chairperson was called on by Mr. Shire in his capacity as Chairperson of AfricanDefenders. Mr. Shire acting as the presiding officer was supported by Hon Joaquine

De Mello (Board member of Tanzania Human Rights Defenders Coalition and Ms. Nibizi, Executive Director of the Burundian Human Rights Defenders Coalition. Before the vote, Mr. Shire recalled the voting process and the nomination process. He noted that three candidates were nominated and presented to the GA. The candidates seeking the chairpersonship were Ms. Brenda Kugonza, Executive Director of WHRDs Network Uganda, Mr. Edmund Yakani, Chairperson of the South Sudan HRD network, and Mr. Ngugi Executive Director of Kenyan HRD Coalition. Each candidate was given five minutes to campaign before the commencement of the electoral process.

13. With support from AfricanDefenders Coordinator, Mr. Joseph Bikanda, ballots were then cast, and votes counted in the presence of the candidates' agents. At the end of the exercise, Mr. Ngugi emerged winner, and was declared the incoming chairperson of the EHAHRD-Net for 2022 to 2027.
14. Following the successful elections, Mr. Hassan Shire proposed to the General Assembly for Adoption of the following resolutions:
  - a. Special resolution on Burundi with a declaration on the human rights situation in the country given the recent political changes.
  - b. A resolution on Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), as DRC is now part of the East African Community what the GA think about admitting DRC HRDs in the Network.
  - c. A resolution on Sudan with a declaration on the human rights situation in the country.
  - d. Finally, whether the Network was to remain East and Horn Network or simply Eastern Network.

The GA made the following resolutions

- a. An annex to this communique highlighting areas of concern, opportunities, and recommendations in Burundi.
  - b. On Sudan, called upon the de facto authorities to halt the excessive use of force and killing of the peaceful protestors, hold perpetrators accountable and put measures in place to end the inter-communal violence, especially in Darfur, South Kordofan, and Eastern Sudan.
  - c. DRC was unanimously admitted to EHAHRD-Net.
  - d. For the name change of the network, it was resolved that it would remain as it is.
15. Participants were invited to a wellbeing session led by Mr. Karis Oteba DefendDefenders' Senior Protection Officer and Wellbeing Lead. Mr. Oteba shared self-care tips with participants to include observing personal boundaries, being sensitive to others, learning to say no, staying connected, eating well, and drinking enough water as well as exercising regularly.
  16. At the conclusion of the GA, Mr. Shire thanked all the delegates for attending this important governance meeting. He then invited the newly elected Chairperson of the network, Mr. Ngugi to close the GA. Mr. Ngugi thanked the delegates for entrusting him as the new chairperson. He pledged to serve the network and asked for all members' unsparing support, cooperation and trust. He then officially closed the General Assembly.

## ANNEX

### **Resolution by the 4<sup>th</sup> General Assembly of the East and Horn of Africa Human Rights Defenders Network on the Human Rights Situation in Burundi**

Despite some symbolic advances recorded by Burundi since the coming to power of President Ndayishimiye in terms of the protection of human rights and good governance, we regret the persistence of serious human rights violations and the closing of civic space. We:

- Regret Burundi's refusal to cooperate with regional and international human rights mechanisms.
- Welcome the new judgment of the East Africa Community (EAC) Court of Justice condemning the third term of the late President Pierre Nkurunziza.
- Demand the implementation of the judgment of the East African Community Court against the third term of Pierre Nkurunziza.
- Call on the State of Burundi, Tanzania, and the DRC to stop the harassment and forced repatriation of refugees.
- Ask the State of Burundi to renew cooperation with the UN and regional mechanisms for the protection of human rights.
- Ask the state of Burundi to rehabilitate CSOs, the media and their members, victims of unjust judgments.
- Ask the State of Burundi to guarantee the independence of the UN Human Rights Council Commission of Inquiry on Burundi for human rights.
- Ask the State to respect its commitments regarding the promotion and protection of human rights and to prosecute the alleged perpetrators of human rights.
- Undertake to initiate dialogue with all stakeholders with a view to improving the human rights situation in Burundi and the opening of civic space.
- Call on the African Union as guarantor of the Arusha Peace Agreement for Peace and Reconciliation in Burundi, to contribute to the return of effective peace in Burundi.