



REFLECTIONS ON THE 53RD SESSION OF THE UN HUMAN RIGHTS COUNCIL

Another session, another 30 resolutions. The conclusion of the Human Rights Council's 53rd session (HRC53) once again raised the question of the Council's overloaded agenda. If important resolutions addressing human rights crises were adopted, including on Belarus, Eritrea, Myanmar, Syria, and Ukraine, observers can but wonder why states keep adding debates and reports to the Council's programme of work, including on issues that had been settled through multilateral negotiations. I will come back to this, and to attempts to undermine multilateralism below.

Engagements during the session

Let me start with a word on my engagements at HRC53. As always, with my team, I met with ambassadors, state representatives, and OHCHR officials, exchanging ideas and comparing notes on human rights and the protection of human rights defenders (HRDs) in Africa.

In particular, I congratulated Cabo Verde on announcing its candidacy for membership in the Council (for the 2025-2027 period) and Tanzania on hosting the upcoming 77th session of the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights (ACHPR).

DefendDefenders continues to both conduct evidence-based advocacy and engage with states at all levels, with the protection of HRDs and the advancement of human rights in mind.

Sudan: strong civil society advocacy to push states to live up to their responsibility

I also took the opportunity of the important debate on Sudan – the first after the Council's special session on the conflict in the country – to highlight the need for stronger steps by the international community. A permanent ceasefire is everyone's absolute priority, but stopping the fighting will only be sustainable if accountability is centred. In an oral statement, I highlighted the need for the Council to establish an investigative mechanism and to hold those responsible to account.

The enhanced interactive dialogue made clear that the geopolitical divisions observed during the special session of 11 May 2023 are still present. While one group of countries focused on the catastrophic human rights and humanitarian situation, as well as the need for accountability, other countries stressed Sudan's sovereignty and pushed back against HRC involvement.

Despite civil society's efforts, the Council failed to adopt a new resolution on the country. Together with Dr. Sara Abdelgalil of Sudan's Doctors for Human Rights (read her interview by Geneva Solutions [here](#)), the DefendDefenders team met with a series of human rights experts, state representatives, and OHCHR officials, making the case for continued attention to the country. We also held a [public event](#) on Sudan.

We will continue to push for the establishment of an [investigative mechanism](#), which is the least the Council can do for the victims and survivors of the conflict and violations committed in the country in the last three decades.

Eritrea: a stronger resolution, in line with our expectations

Irrespective of narratives on "state sovereignty" and the need to ensure that the country concerned consents to HRC resolutions, the Council has a [mandate](#) to address country situations. This means that consensus should not be sought at any cost, and that sometimes a vote is necessary to make the Council's voice heard.

In this regard, we welcome the adoption of a strengthened [resolution](#) on Eritrea this year. Resolution 53/2 highlights a range of violations committed by Eritrean authorities, including arbitrary detentions, enforced disappearances, torture, and the near-total closure of the country's civic and democratic space. As we highlighted in a [press release](#): "Eleven years on, Human Rights Council scrutiny of Eritrea remains vital."

Prior to HRC53, we led dozens of civil society organisations in [calling](#) for a strong resolution that clearly describes and condemns Eritrean government violations, as opposed to short (so-called "procedural") resolutions that simply seek to extend the [Special Rapporteur's](#) mandate.

During the session, we conducted advocacy with [Veronica Almedom](#), highlighting ongoing violations and abuses committed by the country's authorities. We will continue to encourage states to reinstate fully substantive resolutions on Eritrea's human rights situation, as was the case before 2019.

Geopolitical divisions and attempts to undermine multilateralism

After a draft resolution was rejected for the first time ever ([Yemen](#), in October 2021), the Council [rejected](#) a second text, addressing China's Xinjiang region, in October 2022. This, as well as a number of initiatives that undermine agreed language and diplomatic compromises, shows that geopolitical divisions are increasing.



This was clear at HRC53 as the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) presented a resolution on “countering religious hatred constituting incitement to discrimination, hostility or violence,” allegedly to respond to the burning of a Quran in Sweden. (It should be noted that, this time, many of the states that voted against holding a debate on the situation of Uyghurs and other Muslim minorities in Xinjiang, voted in favour of that resolution.)

The issue of religious hatred had actually been settled in 2011 with landmark [HRC resolution 16/18](#). Resolution 16/18 had brought an end to the human rights-incompatible “defamation of religions” agenda and led to a consensual outcome, building on the [Rabat Plan of Action](#) and embodied in the [Istanbul Process](#). This diplomatic consensus is now seriously undermined.

In a [statement](#), civil society organisations, including DefendDefenders, wrote: “We regret the adoption of a new resolution on countering religious hatred [...]. While we are dismayed over the rise of hate against persons on the basis of their religion or belief worldwide, this resolution ultimately aims to protect not individuals but rather religious books and symbols that do not enjoy protection under international human rights law. We note that prohibitions on the defamation of religions fuel division and religious intolerance by shutting down interfaith dialogue and can facilitate human rights violations against religious minorities.”

With civil society partners, we expressed [concern](#) over another problematic resolution, led by China, on “the contribution of development to the enjoyment of human rights.” As we put it, it weakens the interdependence of human rights and sustainable development through the inclusion of undefined concepts such as “people-centred [as opposed to human rights-based] approach to development.”
Preparing for the next session

The next regular session, HRC54, will take place in September-October 2023. DefendDefenders and AfricanDefenders will once again be present to make the voices of African human rights defenders heard in Geneva and considered in decision-making on African country situations. Debates and reports on Burundi, Ethiopia, and Somalia, as well as the issue of reprisals, among others, are expected.

ORAL STATEMENTS TO THE COUNCIL



**DefendDefenders' oral
statements at HRC53**

ADVOCACY DOCUMENTS AND PRESS RELEASES

1

Letters



Sudan: Urgently convene a special session of the Human Rights Council and establish an investigative mechanism



Eritrea: The UN Human Rights Council should adopt a strong resolution

2

Press release



The Human Rights Council breaks the international community's deadlock on Sudan



UN rights body extends vital scrutiny of human rights in Eritrea

ADVOCACY DOCUMENTS AND PRESS RELEASES

“Sudan: the role of UN and African human rights mechanisms”

Sudan: The role of UN and African Human Rights Mechanisms
Side event on Sudan at HRC53

Date Tuesday, 27 June, 2023
Time 12:00 - 13:00

Venue Palais des Nations, Room XXV

Panelists
Dr. Sara Abdelgallil
Sudan's Doctors for Human Rights
Mr. Jibril Abdelbagi
African Centre for Democracy and Human Rights Studies
Ms. Enass Muzamel
Madaniya

Moderator
Ms. Estella Kabachwezi
DefendDefenders

For more information please contact
geneva@defenddefenders.org

Note: Snacks and refreshments will be provided

After armed conflict broke out in Sudan, on 15 April 2023, 100 civil society organisations called on member and observer states of the UN Human Rights Council to come together and convene a special session. The Council acted on their first ask and held a Special Session on 11 May 2023. However, it failed to act on the second, namely, to establish an independent mechanism to investigate violations and advance accountability in Sudan.

The Council also failed to speak with one voice. Due to geopolitical divisions, HRC resolution 5-36/1 was adopted not by consensus but by vote. Meanwhile, other international, as well as African and regional bodies, have been largely silent. The UN Security Council has failed to adopt even a modest resolution or presidential statement. Even if, in the near future, the African Union, IGAD, and/or the Arab League successfully mediate between the warring parties and broker a sustainable cease-fire, any agreement is unlikely to meaningfully address human rights.

In this context, civil society stresses that documenting and exposing violations, including by establishing the facts, circumstances and root causes of violations, collecting and preserving evidence, and identifying perpetrators with a view to ensuring criminal and political accountability, is key to any lasting solution to the conflict in Sudan. In this event, human rights experts will discuss the role of UN and African human rights mechanisms, focusing on the HRC and the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights (ACHPR), in addressing the Sudan crisis and helping build a rights-respecting, democratic Sudan.

Logos: International Service for Human Rights, AFRICANDEFENDERS, African Centre for Democracy and Human Rights Studies, GLOBAL CENTRE FOR THE RESPONSIBILITY TO PROTECT, DEFENDEFENDERS, AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL, fidh, CSW everyone free to believe, CIVICUS, HUMAN RIGHTS WATCH, AACHD, OHCHR, Human Rights Institute.

RESOLUTIONS

- Eritrea
- Sudan (36th Special Session, 11 May 2023)
- Civil society space
- Countering religious hatred constituting incitement to discrimination, hostility or violence

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53rd regular session of the Human Rights Council: Resolutions, decisions and President's statements

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Resolutions, decisions and President's statements

Document links to the adopted texts in the first column below will work once the documents have been processed, translated and released in all six official languages of the United Nations on the **Official Document System (ODS)**. To search for final adopted texts on ODS, enter the final number in the search field, preceded by A/HRC/RES for resolutions, A/HRC/DEC for decisions or A/HRC/PRST for President's statements.

More information about the consideration of each draft proposal, including any oral revisions, amendments, statements of programme