

81st Ordinary Session of the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights

Statement under Item 5: Activity Report of the Special Rapporteur on Human Rights Defenders and Focal Point on Reprisals in Africa

Observer Status No. 359

Honourable Chairperson,
Honourable Commissioners,
Distinguished State Delegates,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

On 31 July 2024, the **Zimbabwe** Lawyers for Human Rights (ZLHR) issued a chilling tweet: *"We are trying to ascertain their whereabouts and what is happening to them."* This single sentence lays bare the brutal reality for human rights defenders (HRDs) in the country, as they endure an intensified crackdown ahead of the Southern African Development Community (SADC) summit. The arrest of 80 pro-democracy activists is a unmistakable symptom of a continent-wide epidemic of repression. Yet, this is not just Zimbabwe's story—it is a cry of anguish echoed across Africa.

This tweet is a grave reflection of the deepening crisis affecting HRDs everywhere in Africa. Year by year, attacks against HRDs grow more aggressive, as both state and non-state actors ramp up efforts to crush anyone who dares to stand for justice, equality, and human dignity. Those who should be hailed as heroes are instead vilified as "enemies of the state." In **Kenya**, the government's response to peaceful protests has unleashed a wave of violence, where excessive and unwarranted force has led to unlawful deaths and injuries.

But outside of armed conflict situations, perhaps nowhere is the situation more dire than in **Burkina Faso**. There, HRDs are not only being silenced by a repressive military junta, but are also being hunted down and killed by armed groups. They are trapped between the hammer of state brutality and the anvil of militant violence, with no safe space left to stand. The military junta, operating with impunity, has dismantled media freedom and critical voices are now in peril. ***The Commission must urgently issue a resolution demanding that the military authorities uphold the rights of journalists and critics, in line with their obligations under the African Charter.*** It is time for this Commission to step forward with resolve.

Chairperson,

The killing of lawyer Elvino Dias in **Mozambique** tragic incident is yet another reminder of how fragile defending democratic values can be, as we have seen in other regions where those standing up for justice are silenced through violence.

We stand in solidarity with our comrades who held a peaceful protest in this plenary yesterday (**19 October 2024**) and call on the Commission to urge the Mozambican government to conduct an independent, transparent, and impartial investigation into Dias's killing, publish the findings, and ensure those responsible are brought to justice.

Honourable Chairperson,

Since 2020, DefendDefenders/AfricanDefenders have been meticulously documenting the waves of violence and repression against HRDs, activists, and journalists across Africa. Our records are overflowing with cases of harassment, threats, and persecution. It is not an isolated trend. It is a calculated campaign of terror designed to crush the human spirit and stifle the dreams of a free, just, and democratic Africa. Despite repeated calls for justice from HRDs, civil society, and international human rights bodies—including this very Commission—the response has been deafening silence, allowing the persecution to spread unchecked.

We applaud the Commission's role in developing the *Declaration of Human Rights Defenders in Africa*, but declarations alone will not save lives. We must translate these promises into real, actionable protections. HRDs need more than words—they need safety, they need support, and they need justice. Now, more than ever, the protections we speak of must be enforced at national and regional levels, where the danger is greatest and the stakes are highest.

Honourable Chairperson, Members of the Commission,

The time for silence is over. The future of human rights in Africa hangs in the balance, and we cannot afford to turn a blind eye. If we do not act now; if we do not protect those who fight to defend our rights, we will risk betraying the very values we claim to uphold. The lives, dignity, and future of HRDs across this continent depend on our courage and our actions today.

Thank you.