

62nd regular session of the UN Human Rights Council

Informal High-Level Discussion on the Occasion of the 20th Anniversary of the Human Rights Council

Joint Statement by:

Asian Forum for Human Rights and Development (FORUM-ASIA)

Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies

East and Horn of Africa Human Rights Defenders Project (DefendDefenders)

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We speak on behalf of FORUM-ASIA, Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies and DefendDefenders – three regional organisations that have over the past 20 years facilitated the participation of hundreds of human rights defenders in the work of this Council.

We welcome this high-level discussion marking the Council's 20th anniversary.

The Human Rights Council remains a crucial lifeline for human rights defenders, civil society, and victims and survivors worldwide. When other UN bodies, including the Security Council, remain deadlocked by political dynamics, this Council has acted to address both persistent and emerging crises, galvanising political will and establishing accountability pathways. From the Commission of Inquiry on Syria to the IIM on Myanmar and the FFM for Sudan, these mechanisms have produced and produce evidentiary records feeding international criminal processes and keeping pathways to justice open where no other avenue exists.

Special procedures, both country-specific and thematic mandates, have kept the voices of victims and survivors at the centre of the work of the Council. By naming what states refuse to acknowledge — the weaponisation of counter-terrorism laws, digital surveillance, and restrictions targeting civil society — they have contributed to strengthening normative and protection frameworks grounded in the lived experiences of defenders, victims and survivors.

Critically, the relevance and implementation of almost any Council outcome depend on the ownership and meaningful engagement of national and regional civil society. Yet reprisals, financial constraints, and restrictions on UN access are eroding that engagement even as defenders continue to invest in this Council, in line with the recognition in its founding documents of civil society as an essential partner.

That partnership is now under strain.

We ask panelists: how can the Council, the UN system, and member states protect and strengthen the contributions of grassroots, national and regional civil society including victims and survivors amid these mounting challenges?