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Laura Dolci-Kanaan, NGO Liaison Officer
Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, Civil Society Section
Palais Wilson
52 rue des Pâquis
CH-1201 Geneva, Switzerland

30 June 2015

Dear Ms. Dolci-Kanaan,

Freedom House writes in response to the request of the Civil Society Section of the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights to share perspectives on creating and maintaining the space for civil society to work freely and independently around the world. Freedom House analyzes the state of human rights and democracy worldwide, advocates for reform, and takes action by supporting frontline human rights defenders and organizations in closed and closing societies.

In this submission, we share recommendations based on our experience supporting civil society in closed and closing spaces around the world. We also include information about the emergency resources that Freedom House provides for activists under threat.

I. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SUPPORTING LOCAL CIVIL SOCIETY

In closed and closing spaces around the world, Freedom House has strategized with and supported local civil society in efforts to continue operating and asserting a voice despite government restrictions and pressure. Effective and strategic international community support for local civil society is essential, particularly in closed and closing environments. Freedom House offers the following recommendations for strengthening approaches and strategies:

1) Take a flexible, nuanced approach to funding civil society and managing grants.

A more flexible, nuanced international community approach to providing funding for civil society in closed and closing environments would increase opportunities for informal groups and nontraditional actors, which are key drivers of change; respond to security concerns in closed and closing environments; and encourage innovation. Our specific recommendations include:

- Increase institutional (as opposed to project-based) support: In closed and closing spaces, organizations' primary asset is a team of like-minded professionals that are committed to continuing their work even under significant government pressure. Institutional support is necessary to ensure

that these teams remain intact and retain valuable staff even in the absence of funding for specific projects. Moreover, a strong base of institutional funding allows for CSOs to cover the increased administrative costs associated with new, burdensome legal and bureaucratic requirements designed by governments to deter CSOs from continuing their work.

2) Coordinate and strengthen strategies for supporting civil society in closed and closing spaces.

A coordinated international strategy for countering government repression and supporting civil society in closed and closing society allows for effective, targeted assistance to maintain space for civil society to work. Our recommendations for strengthening strategies include:

- Encourage public support for civil society: In many closing societies, the public views civil society as a group of capital-based elites focused on government compliance with international obligations. The international community should develop and support program strategies that allow CSOs to develop and disseminate a fuller, more accurate account of the way that CSOs promote security and stability, socioeconomic development, and an enabling environment for business..
- Ensure that the public has access to independent information: In closed and closing societies, the government enjoys disproportionate influence over the public's access to information, and creates and disseminates information favorable to those in power. CSOs are losing the battle against government-sponsored propaganda that demonizes them as outsiders who are a threat to national interests. Independent and alternative media deserve support from the international community to provide independent information to domestic constituencies.
- Build networks and trust among members of civil society, and between civil society and the international community: Activists in closed and closing societies often demonstrate little coordination, frequently due to the low levels of trust in a context of sustained harassment and intimidation. The international community should support building networks and trust among local activists. In addition, the international community should build long-term relationships and communicate their continued support after a government crackdown.

II. FREEDOM HOUSE RESOURCES FOR ACTIVISTS UNDER THREAT

Freedom House implements one of the largest Emergency Assistance Programs globally, which has provided emergency financial assistance to over 600 at-risk HRDs and civil society organizations (CSOs) annually. Freedom House also leads two international consortia that offer emergency assistance, security grants, and short-term programmatic support.

- Freedom House's Emergency Assistance Program supports threatened civil society organizations, individual human rights defenders, and survivors of religious persecution with short-term emergency grants for medical expenses, legal representation, prison visits, trial monitoring, humanitarian assistance, temporary relocation, security, equipment replacement, dependent support, and other types of urgent expenses. To

qualify for assistance, threats must have occurred within the past 3 months and be based on the applicant's human rights work (or persecution on the basis of religion/belief). To request an application or for more information: info@hrdassist.org

- The Lifeline Embattled CSO Assistance Fund provides emergency financial assistance to civil society organizations (CSOs) under threat or attack and advocacy support responding to broader threats to civil society. Lifeline supports a variety of CSOs that conduct advocacy, promote and protect human rights, and/or act in a watchdog capacity, including human rights organizations, journalist associations, student groups, labor unions, think tanks, and others. Lifeline is a consortium of seven international partners and receives contributions through an international donor pool of 17 governments and independent foundations that support democracy and human rights. To request an application for more information: info@csolifeline.org
- The Dignity for All: LGBTI Assistance Program provides emergency funds, advocacy support, and security assistance to human rights defenders and civil society organizations under threat or attack due to their work for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex (LGBTI) human rights. Dignity for All also supports targeted, time-bound advocacy campaigns to respond to threats or attacks on LGBTI human rights and human rights work, as well as assistance for individual victims or communities connected to funded advocacy campaigns. Security training is available to proactively assist organizations to continue their work more safely. To request an application or for more information: info@dignitylgbti.org

In closing, we urge you to take these considerations and resources into account as you draft your report with recommendations on creating and maintaining the space for civil society to work freely and independently. Thank you for the opportunity to provide these comments and for your consideration. We would welcome further consultation on this issue in the future.

Regards,

Mark P. Lagon
President, Freedom House