

**High-level plenary meeting on the twentieth anniversary of the adoption of the  
Declaration on the Right and Responsibility of Individuals, Groups and Organs of  
Society to Promote and Protect Universally Recognized Human Rights and  
Fundamental Freedoms**

**December 18, 2018**

**María Fernanda Espinosa, President of the UN General Assembly**

- ✚ Human rights defenders give life to the Universal Declaration. They are agents for change. These may be women activists, indigenous people, migrants, workers, people with disabilities, people of African descent, peasants, children, young people or the elderly. And whoever they are, their contributions are decisive. They give a voice to those who have none. They empower the excluded. They challenge injustice. They prevent impunity and assist victims. Without these women and men who individually or collectively vanquish fear and indifference, much of the progress we are now able to enjoy would not have been possible. (General Assembly, 59th plenary meeting, 73rd session; see [04:18 to 5:02](#)).
- ✚ Rosa Luxemburg said that, “if people did not move, they would not feel their chains.” Human rights defenders are this collective conscience embodied; their actions are an essential part of the universal fight to break the chains preventing us from reaching full equality, justice and dignity for all. (General Assembly, 59th plenary meeting, 73rd session; see [07:06 to 7:28](#)).

**António Guterres, UN Secretary–General**

- ✚ When human rights defenders are threatened, the principles of the United Nations are under attack. Human rights defenders are a great asset in enhancing our work to sustaining peace and sustainable development. These individuals and organisations are often the first to set off alarm bells and provide us with early warnings of impending crisis and they are key actors in the development of potential solutions in all areas of life. I admire their courage and sacrifice. Let us embrace and support human rights defenders everywhere so they can continue to do their essential work. (General Assembly, 59th plenary meeting, 73rd session; see [11:36 to 12:09](#)).

**Michelle Bachelet, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights**

- ✚ The work of human rights defenders contributes to good governance and greater justice, dignity and equality, and a better future for our children. So it is time to turn back the trend of contempt for their voices and their rights. It is time defend the defenders, whose altruism and courage should be an inspiration for us all. (General Assembly, 59th plenary meeting, 73rd session; see [19:17 to 19:35](#)).

**Mr. Michel Forst, the UN Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights Defenders**

- ✚ I believe that we need to go further, much further. Why not draw up United Nations Guidelines on the protection of human rights defenders like those of the European Union and other countries to foster change within the United Nations themselves, so

that resident coordinators and country teams are also bestowed with an integrated strategy for this protection of human rights defenders. So that like the work done by UN Women, or the High Commissioner on Refugees, the WFP, UNESCO, the WHO and why not the World Bank. And all the agencies and United Nations bodies could take on the question of human rights defenders and integrate it when developing their strategies. Today we do need to go further. We no longer need to be diagnosing or taking half measures. Human rights defenders are depending on us, counting on us, and you. They are calling upon us and saying that impunity is the gangrene of states. (General Assembly, 59th plenary meeting, 73rd session; see [24:31 to 25:40](#)).

- ✚ We must stand firm against those who openly or indirectly try to delegitimise human rights defenders and their actions. (General Assembly, 59th plenary meeting, 73rd session; see [26:30 to 26:41](#)).

### **Ine Marie Eriksen Søreide, Minister of Foreign Affairs – Norway**

- ✚ In many regions, the space for civil society is shrinking. Laws are passed to protect public interest; however, what they really do is serve as a detriment to public engagement, undermining the freedom of association and expression. (General Assembly, 59th plenary meeting, 73rd session; see [29:13 to 29:31](#)).
- ✚ We all have a responsibility to do more to protect the brave women and men standing up for injustice against others. To understand their needs, we must listen and engage in dialogue. We must give them the legitimacy through public acknowledgment of their work and we must never stop – never stop – encouraging and funding their work. When violence happens, we have to condemn it. And we should leave no stone left unturned in the search for justice when crimes have been committed. (General Assembly, 59th plenary meeting, 73rd session; see [29:38 to 30:19](#)).
- ✚ It is a paradox that environmental human rights defenders and indigenous peoples fighting to protect our planet are among those who face the greatest risk of violence and killing. (General Assembly, 59th plenary meeting, 73rd session; see [30:25 to 30:39](#)).
- ✚ Prime Minister Ana Brnabić said, “human rights defenders are an important corrective in any society.” Only weak leaders fear being corrected. When established democratic principles, the rule of law and human rights are under severe pressure, we must not give up. What we must do is work together to expand and strengthen the democratic space and ensure the safety of human rights defenders. (General Assembly, 59th plenary meeting, 73rd session; see [32:10 to 32:41](#)).

### **Ms Hina Jilani, Advocate of the Supreme Court of Pakistan and Member of the Elders**

- ✚ While support for human rights and democracy in structures of the State is slow to emerge or may even have suffered a reversal in some cases, civil society has demonstrated a strong resolve to resist authoritarianism and oppression. Civil society actors have also played a significant role in inducing recognition by states of the concepts of participatory democracy, transparency and accountability. (General Assembly, 59th plenary meeting, 73rd session; see [36:00 to 36:29](#)).
- ✚ The Preamble of the Declaration, ladies and gentlemen, reminds us that absence of peace and security does not in any way justify non-compliance with human rights law and principles. Yet internal conflict, terrorism or other forms of social and political

tensions have been used as an excuse to impose national security legislation that diminishes the space for defending human rights. This has rendered any existing guarantees of protection, ineffective. (General Assembly, 59th plenary meeting, 73rd session; see [40:17 to 40:46](#)).

- ✚ States must also recognise that the independence of civil society is a critical component of democracy. When human rights defenders find themselves under siege, it becomes the responsibility of the international community to support those who are at risk in any country, and in all situations. (General Assembly, 59th plenary meeting, 73rd session; see [41:56 to 42:11](#)).
- ✚ I must state that the purposes of the UN Charter will only be fully served when the international community renews its resolve to put up a joint front against trends of authoritarianism that undermine the value of multilateralism and denigrate the values [that we have taken so many decades] and the principles that we have collectively set in order to make this a civilised world. This is the only way that the world can be saved from conflict, violence and chaos. (General Assembly, 59th plenary meeting, 73rd session; see [43:52 to 44:36](#)).

**Ms Alice Mogwe, Director of Ditshwanelo (The Botswana Centre for Human Rights)**

- ✚ Human rights defenders working for the protection of the dignity of all persons are often forgotten, under-resourced, discredited, discriminated against, criminalised, arrested, tortured, disappeared and their NGOs closed down. Such attacks have broadened in scope and have reached alarming levels, especially within the context of countering terrorism and preventing violent extremism. This has resulted in an increasing, shrinking and closing of independent civil society space. (General Assembly, 59th plenary meeting, 73rd session; see [48:39 to 49:09](#)).
- ✚ States have the primary obligation to respect, protect and fulfil human rights and to implement the Human Rights Defenders Declaration, which was approved by consensus 20 years ago. In spite of this, the State remains the main perpetrator of violations against human rights defenders either directly or in complicity with non-State actors. Instead, States must take urgent action to recognise the essential role of human rights defenders, protect those at risk and take concrete measures to foster a safe and enabling environment, including through adoption of national action plans on the protection of human rights defenders. (General Assembly, 59th plenary meeting, 73rd session; see [51:05 to 51:40](#)).
- ✚ States must also break the cycle of impunity by holding perpetrators to account for attacks against human rights defenders. Killings, criminalisations and smear campaigns must stop. (General Assembly, 59th plenary meeting, 73rd session; see [51:53 to 52:05](#)).