



# General Assembly

Seventy-third session

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Official Records

*President:* Ms. Espinosa Garcés. . . . . (Ecuador)

*The meeting was called to order at 3.10 p.m.*

**High-level 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**

**Agenda item 74 (continued)**

**Promotion and protection of human rights**

**(b) Human rights questions, including alternative approaches for improving the effective enjoyment of human rights and fundamental freedoms**

**The President** (*spoke in Spanish*): At the outset, I would like to thank the delegations of Argentina, Italy and Norway for their valuable work in the preparation of this high-level meeting.

On 9 December 1998, the eve of the fiftieth anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the General Assembly adopted a fundamental document to make its principles a reality, 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. It was a notable achievement for States and civil society, which went to great lengths to arrive at a text that is at once principled and pragmatic. Twenty years later, we are celebrating its adoption, which marked a milestone in the recognition

and legitimization of the work done by human rights defenders around the world. I would like to touch on two key aspects.

First, regarding the critical role of human rights defenders, there can be no doubt about the essential role they play in building more inclusive, just and free societies. Civil society also remains a fundamental pillar of the international human rights system. It is often those people and organizations that are able to provide us with early warnings of serious and systematic violations of human rights. States have a primary responsibility to create the necessary conditions for those working to promote human rights so that they are able to enjoy and exercise their rights and fundamental freedoms, including freedom of association, the right to peaceful assembly, freedom of opinion and expression and the right to access information. Dialogue and the participation of all members of civil society enable stronger social cohesion and democracies.

Civil society support networks at the local, national, regional and international levels are very important. In that regard, I would like to highlight the convening of the Human Rights Defenders World Summit 2018 in Paris in October. The thirteenth International Conference of National Human Rights Institutions, recently held in Marrakech, was also important. Human rights defenders give life to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. They are agents of change, whether they are women activists, indigenous peoples, migrants, workers, persons with disabilities, people of African descent, peasants, children, young people or older adults. Their contributions are decisive. They give a

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voice to those who do not have a voice, empower the excluded, challenge injustice, redeem victims and prevent impunity.

Without the women and men who individually and collectively overcome fear and indifference, much of the progress that we benefit from today would not have been possible. Just a few hours ago, we handed out the 2018 United Nations Human Rights Prize, which recognized not just the winners — Ms. Rebeca Gyumi, Ms. Joênia Wapichana, Ms. Asma Jahangir and the Front Line Defenders organization — but the work of all human rights defenders around the world.

Secondly, regarding the risks faced by human rights defenders and our responsibility to tackle those risks, we must recognize that in many cases their situation is difficult. The records show that more than 3,500 human rights defenders and activists have been killed because of their work since the Declaration was adopted. According to the Front Line Defenders' *Annual Report on Human Rights Defenders at Risk in 2017*, 300 were murdered in 2017 alone. Unfortunately, for many people, defending human rights means exposing themselves to multiple dangers, putting their lives, freedom and safety, and those of their families, at risk.

Women suffer a dual threat, on account both of their gender and their defence and promotion of human rights. In recent years the plight of those working in solidarity with populations on the move, whether migrants or refugees, has worsened. Attacks on environmental defenders have also intensified. This situation cannot be allowed to continue. Threats and intimidation are being used as ways to silence human rights defenders. States must not remain impassive. We must act. If we do not protect those who stand up for our rights, injustice will soon come knocking at our door. One such measure within our reach is to strengthen and support the mandate of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders. According to some, it was Rosa Luxemburg who said, "Those who do not move do not notice their chains." Human rights defenders represent our collective conscience in motion. Their actions are an essential part of the universal struggle to break the chains preventing us from achieving full equality, justice and dignity for all.

I hope that today's commemoration strengthens our commitment to the Declaration and to those who devote their lives and work to fighting for the dignity and welfare of their fellow human beings. If we assume

our responsibility as citizens, all of us will become human rights defenders and can contribute, through our actions and decisions, to fulfilling the principles of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which we must all honour. We should therefore recall article 1 of the Declaration, which states that

"All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood."

Let us strive to achieve that.

I now have the honour to invite the Secretary-General, His Excellency Mr. António Guterres, to make a statement.

**The Secretary-General:** Today we commemorate the United Nations Declaration on the Right and Responsibility of Individuals, Groups and Organs of Society to Promote and Protect Universally Recognized Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, adopted by consensus 20 years ago. As Wangari Maathai, the late Kenyan environmental campaigner and Nobel laureate, once said,

"Human rights are not things that are put on the table for people to enjoy. These are things you fight for and then you protect."

That is what human rights defenders do for the benefit of us all. Today, therefore, I join all present hereto express my admiration for the world's human rights defenders, who dedicate and sometimes sacrifice their lives to demanding respect for economic, social, cultural, civil and political rights. They are a diverse set of individuals and groups — indigenous peoples defending their lands, traditions and the environment; citizen groups saving migrants from drowning or exploitation; humanitarian workers delivering life-saving aid to civilians caught up in conflict; women fighting for participation in boardrooms and at peace tables; lawyers advocating for the independence of the judiciary; trade union leaders pushing for decent jobs and a living wage; journalists investigating disappearances and corruption; campaigners protesting pollution and climate change; people of African descent standing up against racism and discrimination; and health workers looking for ways to improve treatment for HIV patients. All of them are defending and advocating for the rights, principles and values on which our Organization is built. Those rights remain under threat in many areas.

We are seeing an increase in intolerance and a shrinking space for civil society. Human rights and their defenders are under increasing pressure in all regions. That must not become a new normal. Some defenders are persecuted, intimidated, incarcerated and even murdered, while a number of nations have enacted laws or adopted measures, under the pretext of countering terrorism, that restrict the work of human rights defenders.

It is important to recognize that human rights defenders are essential partners of Governments and the United Nations in tackling the enormous challenges that we face globally in fully implementing the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. They can play that crucial role only if they are afforded the necessary protection and room to do so. Promoting human rights strengthens States and societies and helps prevent conflict. Disregard for human rights does great harm. If we had given much greater attention to human rights globally over the past two decades, we could have averted much death, suffering and instability and preserved hard-won development gains. It is imperative that States and everyone else consider and treat human rights defenders as partners, not as a threat. 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 for sustaining peace and sustainable development. Those individuals and organizations are often the first to set off alarm bells and provide us with early warnings of impending crises, 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 that they can continue to do their essential work.

**The President** (*spoke in Spanish*): I thank the Secretary-General for his statement.

Before proceeding further, I would like to consult members on inviting the following speakers to make statements, in accordance with paragraph 14 of resolution 72/247 and as mentioned in my presidential letters dated 11, 13 and 17 December 2018: Ms. Michelle Bachelet, High Commissioner for Human Rights; Mr. Michel Forst, Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders; Ms. Ine Eriksen Søreide, Minister for Foreign Affairs of Norway; Ms. Hina Jilani, Advocate of the Supreme Court of Pakistan and

member of The Elders; Ms. Alice Mogwe, Director of Ditshwanelo-The Botswana Centre for Human Rights; and Ms. Florence Simbiri-Jaoko, Special Envoy of the Global Alliance of National Human Rights Institutions and former Chairperson of Kenya's National Commission on Human Rights.

If there is no objection, may I take it that it is the wish of the General Assembly, without setting a precedent, to invite those speakers to make statements at this commemorative meeting?

*It was so decided* (decision 73/531).

**The President** (*spoke in Spanish*): In accordance with the decision just taken, I now give the floor to the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights.

**Ms. Bachelet** (United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights): It is an honour to commemorate here in the General Assembly the United Nations Declaration on the Right and Responsibility of Individuals, Groups and Organs of Society to Promote and Protect Universally Recognized Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, which 20 years ago affirmed the vital need to respect the dignity and rights of those human rights heroes, whose struggles benefit us all.

The work of human rights defenders benefits States by shaping policies that are responsive to real needs and contribute to better development outcomes, in line with the 2030 Agenda on Sustainable Development and the right to development. The work of human rights defenders benefits societies. They lend their voices to groups that otherwise go unheard. They make societies more inclusive and better able to stand shocks. They help to ensure access to quality education and health care, uphold the rule of law and detect and resolve tensions early on. Through their monitoring and advocacy, human rights defenders also improve societies.

The work of human rights defenders benefits business and businesses themselves. Just 10 days ago, a series of major companies called for respect for the rights of human rights defenders and for businesses to positively contribute to situations in which civic freedoms and human rights defenders are under threat. The work of human rights defenders benefits the people of their own societies and communities. They are truly standing up for the rights of our fellow human beings, in all their diversity.

Consider this year's two Nobel Peace Prize winners, Dr. Denis Mukwege, who has worked with women

survivors of violence and sexual violence for more than 30 years, and Nadia Murad, a brave survivor who has had the strength and compassion to use her freedom to work for the freedom of others. Consider Nelson Mandela, the human rights giant whose centenary we recently celebrated in South Africa. His work and the work of many other great men and women to establish equality in South Africa has been a tremendous inspiration to many States in this Assembly.

Whether it is calling for accountability for the perpetrators of violence, saving migrants from peril, exposing corruption, working to end discrimination or for the rights of indigenous peoples, slum dwellers, older people and people with disabilities, the work of human rights defenders is valuable. Their achievements have been of immense importance to the international community and the Member States of this Assembly.

In December 1998, the Declaration recognized that human rights defenders have a right to express their views, associate together, peacefully assemble and demand that authorities at all levels uphold their solemn commitments to the human rights of the people. The Declaration constitutes a promise by States to protect human rights defenders against any arbitrary action as a consequence of the legitimate exercise of their rights. It is a promise to ensure that defenders have access to effective remedies if their rights are violated and to ensure prompt and impartial investigations into those alleged violations.

Two decades after the adoption of the Declaration, there remains much work to be done. In a growing number of societies across the world, human rights defenders are being slandered as traitors and harassed or attacked. Their work is severely restricted by the authorities. Dissenting and legitimate views are labelled as terrorist. Acts of compassion and solidarity for people in need are denounced and criminalized.

Some areas of human rights defence are particularly dangerous. The Secretary-General pointed out that over the past three years, on average, one human rights defender has been killed every day. I want to pay particular tribute to women human rights defenders, who face all of the challenges generally experienced by men defending human rights, but on top of that often endure gender-specific violence and threats, as well as social stigma, especially due to religious extremism and claims of cultural betrayal.

The hectic pace of change is accelerating across the world. Humankind faces new perils and unprecedented transformations. Climate change threatens our future. New information technologies are opening up new channels for the surveillance and restriction of human rights work. The pace of change makes people across the world fearful, mistrustful of the authorities and anxious about their future. Those issues cannot be resolved by repression and violence. People are crying out for policies that can advance a more equal, stable and sustainable world.

Upholding human rights is in the interest of every State. They express the core purpose of the United Nations. We can attain peace, security and sustainable development for all societies only when we promote the dignity and equality of all human beings. The work of human rights defenders contributes to good governance and greater justice, dignity and equality, and a better future for our children. It is time to turn back the trend of contempt for their voices and their rights. It is time to defend the defenders, whose altruism and courage should be an inspiration to us all.

I commit to bringing defenders' voices to the table wherever I can. I commit to speaking up when the space they need to do their invaluable work is under threat. I commit to celebrating their achievements and contributions. And I join the Secretary-General in appealing to all actors to step up their efforts to live up to their promises made 20 years ago.

**The President** (*spoke in Spanish*): In accordance with the decision just taken, I now give the floor to the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders.

**Mr. Forst** (Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders) (*spoke in French*): It is an honour and a privilege for me to address the General Assembly today as the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders. I would like to express my gratitude to those who have made this event possible. An event of this nature in the General Assembly Hall, a high-level meeting devoted to the issue of human rights defenders — who would have thought that could happen 20 years ago?

Allow me to begin by remembering all of the defenders killed in recent months. The year 2018 has been a particularly bloody one for human rights defenders. We have lost friends, colleagues and partners too numerous to mention all of them today. We know

that many died in the anonymity of their commitments, and I cannot help thinking that all of those tragic deaths could have been avoided if States had respected the commitments they made 20 years ago to protect the women and men who defend our rights, democracies and societies.

Over the more than four years that have elapsed since I was entrusted with my current mandate and role, I have listened to the words of human rights defenders and tried to alert the General Assembly to serious situations, while also reminding the Assembly that when human rights defenders disappear or are killed, it is the rule of law that is endangered and, at the same time, the hopes of millions of people. The thousands of human rights defenders whom I have met during my visits are women and men whose lives have been profoundly transformed by coming into brutal contact with injustice and human rights violations. Those defenders are sometimes children, too. Because, yes, there are children who are human rights defenders.

Throughout this year I have been trying to pursue the synergy of 1998 that led to the Assembly's adoption of the United Nations Declaration on the Right and Responsibility of Individuals, Groups and Organs of Society to Promote and Protect Universally Recognized Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms. I did so at the Human Rights Defenders World Summit in Paris. I have done so in the *World Report on the Situation of Human Rights Defenders*, which is published today and in which I have assessed the situation of human rights defenders in 140 countries, highlighting the threats that they face and the attacks that they are subjected to, as well as illustrating the progress that has been made and the good practices adopted in various countries.

I will persist in my efforts, through an international campaign that I am launching today, to give greater visibility to the role of human rights defenders and to continue to alert the General Assembly to their deteriorating situation and the importance of acting together rather than in isolation.

Twenty years ago, the Assembly recognized the importance of protecting human rights defenders. Its members made commitments, adopting a common position on rights and international protection and devising solutions that previously seemed impossible.

In terms of the progress that has been made, I should mention the national, regional and international guidelines for the protection of human rights defenders

that have been adopted by a large number of countries, a number that is increasing every year. I also want to mention the national legislation on the protection of human rights defenders being adopted by a growing number of countries in Latin America, French-speaking Africa and soon, I believe, in Mongolia, too. Another step forward is the significant funding that has been mobilized to support the creation of networks of human rights defenders around the world. Finally, I should mention the work initiated this year by the Secretary-General through his report on human rights defenders (A/73/230).

However, I believe that we need to go further, much further. Just as the European Union and other countries have done, why not establish United Nations guidelines on the protection of human rights defenders in order to promote change within the United Nations, so that the resident coordinators and country teams can also adopt an integrated strategy on the protection of human rights defenders, and so that the work carried out by UN-Women and the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, and even the World Food Programme, UNESCO, the World Health Organization and the World Bank, and all the agencies and bodies of the United Nations, can address the issue of human rights and bear it in mind when developing their strategies?

Today we must indeed go further, because the situation is serious. We are past the diagnosis phase. We can no longer afford to take half-measures. Human rights defenders are counting on the General Assembly. They are appealing to the Assembly, telling it that impunity is the gangrene of States, that the economy enslaves human beings. They are telling it that some international transnational companies are destroying the environment, that fundamentalism raises concerns about the loss of hard-won rights in the social arena and that human rights defenders expect countries and the United Nations to adopt ambitious, systemic strategies for bold, profound and lasting change.

Many aspects of their request are included in the action plan that will be presented to the Assembly today by Ms. Alice Mogwe on behalf of the human rights defenders who convened at the last World Summit, held in Paris. We should all listen to them, and the Assembly should listen to them, because they know better than anyone what they need. We must live up to their hopes. We must stand firm against those who openly or sometimes covertly try to silence human rights defenders and delegitimize their actions, thereby

attacking the mandate that the Assembly has entrusted to me.

**The President** (*spoke in Spanish*): In accordance with the decision just taken, I now give the floor to the Minister for Foreign Affairs of Norway.

**Ms. Søreide** (Norway): First of all, I would like to thank the Secretary-General, the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights and the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders for their powerful statements.

Every day, all over the world, human rights defenders stand up for their own rights and the rights of others, often exposing themselves to severe personal risks and consequences. The General Assembly adopted 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 by consensus 20 years ago. That landmark Declaration made the States Members of the United Nations responsible for supporting and protecting those brave women and men.

Every day, all over the world, human rights defenders take risks and make sacrifices on behalf of all of us. They take risks that are by no means smaller than they were 20 years ago. For that reason, when looking back 20 or 70 years in celebration, we must also look forward, acknowledging that we still have a lot of work to do. That is not to say that there has not been progress. Together we have adopted resolutions in support of women human rights defenders. Together, we have adopted resolutions urging the release of those detained or imprisoned for exercising their fundamental freedoms. That would not have been possible without the support and cooperation of civil society, or without cooperation among regions.

Despite 70 years of significant progress, the world in 2018 can be a very dangerous place for human rights defenders. Stories of threats, harassment, persecution, imprisonment, even murder are told all over the world. The space for civil society is shrinking in many regions. Laws are passed ostensibly to protect public interests, but what they really do is serve as a deterrent to public engagement, undermining freedom of association and expression. As reported by the United Nations, human rights defenders are being killed on a daily basis.

We all have a responsibility to do more to protect the brave women and men who stand up to injustice

against others. To understand their needs, we must listen and engage in dialogue. We must give them legitimacy through public acknowledgement of their work. And we must never stop encouraging and funding their work. When violence happens, we must condemn it, and we must leave no stone unturned in the search for justice when crimes have been committed.

In 2015 we agreed on the Sustainable Development Goals, the blueprint for the world we all want. It is a paradox that environmental human rights defenders and indigenous peoples, fighting to protect our planet, are among those who face the greatest risks of violence and assassination. Recent reports show that environmental human rights defenders are among the most marginalized. Respect for human rights, the environment and economic growth are not contradictions.

Let us work together to strengthen the protection of environmental human rights defenders through the draft resolution on that topic to be considered at the fortieth session of the Human Rights Council. It is our hope that the draft resolution will make a real difference for the courageous people standing up against the exploitation of land and resources.

The principle of human rights is one of the founding pillars of the United Nations. It is a goal in itself and a prerequisite for sustainable development, security and peace. We welcome the initiative announced by the Secretary-General to develop a more coherent and comprehensive approach to supporting human rights defenders at the United Nations. We also call for a strong and well-resourced Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights. The Office currently receives only 3 per cent of the United Nations regular budget.

Our commitment to promoting, protecting and realizing all human rights and fundamental freedoms continues in New York, Geneva and what Eleanor Roosevelt called “small places close to home”. As the Prime Minister of Norway, Erna Solberg, has said,

“Human rights defenders are an important corrective in any society, and only weak leaders fear correction.” (*A/71/PV.14, p. 27*)

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.

**The President:** (*spoke in Spanish*): In accordance with the decision just taken, I now give the floor to the Advocate of the Supreme Court of Pakistan and member of The Elders.

**Ms. Jilani** (Advocate of the Supreme Court of Pakistan and member of The Elders): I would like to begin by expressing my appreciation to the General Assembly for its decision to devote a high-level plenary meeting to 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, and by thanking you, Madam President, for convening this meeting and providing us with an opportunity to assess progress in the protection of activities in the defence of human rights.

As a human rights defender myself, I believe that the adoption of the Declaration was a significant addition to the standard-setting work of the United Nations. While the right to defend human rights is manifestly inherent in the protections and fundamental freedoms provided for in the overall human rights framework, the Declaration was the first human rights instrument to articulate that right more definitively, by declaring that everyone has the right, individually and in association with others, to strive for the promotion, protection and realization of human rights at the national and international levels.

The Declaration reiterates the responsibility of States to create an enabling environment for conducting activities for the protection and promotion of human rights and to eliminate impunity for violations against those carrying out such activities. At the same time, the Declaration stresses the role of civil society in promoting human rights and the duty it owes to the community to contribute to the advancement of democratic societies, institutions and processes.

On the occasion of the twentieth anniversary of the adoption of the Declaration and the seventieth anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, I want to pay tribute to the work of human rights defenders, who are fundamental actors in implementing the overall international human rights framework. The goals of sustaining democracy, maintaining international peace and security and providing or advancing a people-oriented agenda for development

cannot be accomplished without the contributions of human rights defenders. They contribute to poverty alleviation, humanitarian assistance and post-conflict reconstruction, as well as to the fight against violence, discrimination and exclusion.

While support for human rights and democracy in State structures has been slow to emerge, and in some cases may even have suffered a reversal, civil society has demonstrated a strong resolve to resist authoritarianism and oppression. Civil-society actors have also played a significant role in inducing States to recognize the concepts of participatory democracy, transparency and accountability. That has not been easily done. Human rights defenders have suffered severe harm in the process of defending human rights. Several reports by United Nations bodies, both before and after the Declaration on human rights defenders was adopted, bear witness to those alarming trends. But I also acknowledge the steps taken by some States to create a safe and enabling environment for the promotion, protection and defence of human rights.

I am also encouraged by the extent to which the adoption of the Declaration has contributed to the recognition of human rights defenders as agents of progressive change, and I am fully conscious that the valuable work of the special procedures of the United Nations human rights system, especially the mandate holders on the situation of human rights defenders, is beginning to produce results. I also appreciate the initiatives taken by regional human rights systems to create awareness of the provisions of the Declaration and for developing protection systems to keep human rights defenders safe from harm.

However, it is regrettable that we have not yet been able to eliminate those negative trends to any significant extent, or effectively protect human rights defenders and the activities that they carry out. Human rights defenders in many parts of the world continue to be subject to assassination, disappearance, arbitrary arrest and detention and torture, as well as vilification campaigns and the criminalization of their activities. A number of human rights defenders are living in self-imposed exile after having to flee their countries to safeguard their lives or liberty.

Reprisals and repressive measures have been taken against individuals and groups who have reported human rights abuse to international bodies, including the United Nations human rights mechanisms.

Human right defenders whose work challenges social structures, economic interests or traditional practices face greater risks. The work of women human rights defenders continues to be hampered by States as well as various social and private actors. They become particularly vulnerable to prejudice, exclusion and public repudiation when they are engaged in the defence of women's rights. The recognition of the rights of children and adolescents to participation and association, and their recognition as human rights defenders, has yet to come.

There are several examples of the coercive power of the State being used against human rights defenders, at times as a result of pressure from powerful economic interests. Leaders of indigenous and other minority communities, leaders of movements of the poor, trade union leaders and defenders of the rights of displaced persons, migrants and refugees are increasingly being targeted.

I want to call the Assembly's attention to the reports from several reliable sources of the serious harm that human rights defenders working for land and environmental rights have suffered, and I call on the international community to take urgent measures to safeguard those who are working to protect those rights. In that regard, I must commend the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights and the International Court of Justice for their work in highlighting the plight of defenders engaged in this field and for developing jurisprudence that strengthens the legitimacy of their work and their entitlement to protection.

The preamble of the Declaration reminds us that the absence of peace and security does not in any way justify non-compliance with human rights law and principles. Yet internal conflict, terrorism and 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. That has rendered any existing guarantees of protection ineffective. Freedom of expression and peaceful protest has been severely constrained. Freedom of association is increasingly being infringed through laws and regulations that impose a wide range of restrictive conditions on the registration, management, operation and financing of non-governmental organizations. Such measures have forced defenders to either continue their work without legal protection or terminate their activities.

Crackdowns on civil society are proving to be the opening barrage of autocratic leaders in their broader assaults on democracy and the rule of law. States must be reminded that civil-society actors engaged in activities to promote human rights do not obstruct national security efforts. In fact, by reducing poverty, increasing access to justice and helping to resolve local grievances through peaceful means, civil society has helped societies to move out of the shadow of violence. States must also recognize 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. States Members of the United Nations must renew their commitment to their collective responsibility to enforce respect for human rights. At the same time, all the organs of the United Nations must work together to facilitate and accelerate progress in achieving the required level of protection for the implementation of the right to defend human rights, as the Declaration intended.

Finally, I must share a continuing concern. Over the course of eight years as the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on the situation of human rights defenders, I have been informed many times of the difficulty that human rights defenders have in gaining access to United Nations personnel at the country level and the disturbing lack of response they get to the human rights concerns that they encountered. I recognize the complexities inherent in coordinating the work of the United Nations machinery and integrating human rights across the whole of the United Nations system. I am also aware that a good deal of progress has been made in that regard in recent years. Nevertheless, I continue to receive such reports and they remain a concern for the human rights community. When human rights defenders, themselves at risk for having urgent information about very serious and widespread human rights violations, fail to get a response from an agency that in many cases would be their first port of call, it surely indicates that a great deal of progress remains to be made. I can only express my deep regret at all such failures where they have occurred.

In conclusion, I must stress that the purposes of the Charter of the United Nations will be fully served only when the international community renews its resolve to put up a joint front against the strength of authoritarianism, which undermines the value of



multilateralism and denigrates the values that have taken so many decades to instil, as well as the principles that we have collectively established in order to make this a civilized world. That is the only way that the world can be saved from conflict, violence and chaos.

**The President** (*spoke in Spanish*): In accordance with the decision just taken, I now give the floor to the Director of Ditshwanelo-The Botswana Centre for Human Rights.

**Ms. Mogwe** (Ditshwanelo-The Botswana Centre for Human Rights): At the outset, I would like to thank the President of the General Assembly for inviting me to speak at this high-level plenary meeting. I would also like to thank the co-facilitators of this event, Argentina, Italy and Norway, for their tireless work in organizing it. I particularly want to acknowledge Norway, whose leadership in facilitating the adoption of the General Assembly resolution on human rights defenders made today's high-level plenary meeting possible.

Twenty years ago, between 8 and 11 December 1998, Amnesty International, the International Federation for Human Rights, the Fondation Danielle Mitterrand and the International Movement ATD Fourth World convened the first Human Rights Defenders World Summit. Its aim was to celebrate the adoption by consensus 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, also known as the United Nations Declaration on human rights defenders. It recognized for the first time that everyone, individually and collectively, has a right and duty to promote, protect and defend human rights.

I was among the hundreds of participants gathered at the second Human Rights Defenders World Summit, held in Paris from 29 to 31 October. I bring to this body the outcomes of that Summit. The three broad priority areas identified were the seventieth anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the twentieth anniversary of the United Nations Declaration on human rights defenders; the global challenges facing human rights defenders; and an urgent call for action, directed at both State and non-State actors and other stakeholders, to protect human rights defenders.

First, regarding the seventieth anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the twentieth anniversary of the United Nations Declaration on human rights defenders, it was noted

that much still remains to be done to ensure dignity for all and guarantee peace, security and sustainable development. That can be done only if we advance justice, freedom and equality for all — the ultimate goals of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. A key positive outcome of the United Nations Declaration on human rights defenders was the establishment of the mechanism of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders in the year 2000.

Secondly, regarding the global challenges facing human rights defenders, human rights defenders worldwide are constantly being attacked and are often killed for protecting and promoting civil and political rights. However, recent data collected by Front Line Defenders is showing a new trend in violations. In 2017, 312 human rights defenders in 27 countries were killed for their peaceful work. They were mostly engaged in defending land, environmental and indigenous people's rights, often within the context of mega-projects and extractive industries. More than 3,500 human rights defenders have been killed over the past 20 years, according to the Human Rights Defender Memorial.

Democratic values are under threat, while authoritarianism, unaccountable Governments and businesses, systematic and systemic corruption, inequality and discrimination, overexploitation of natural resources and religious and political extremism are all on the rise. Human rights defenders working for the protection of the dignity of all persons are often forgotten, underresourced, discredited, discriminated against, criminalized, arrested, tortured or abducted, while their non-governmental organizations are often closed down. Such attacks have broadened in scope and reached alarming levels, especially in the context of countering terrorism and preventing violent extremism. That has resulted in an increase in the shrinking and closing of the independent civil-society space.

Unfortunately, this challenge to human rights and those who defend them has clearly permeated the United Nations, an Organization that has human rights as one of its pillars, according to the Charter of the United Nations. The fact that my colleagues and friends from civil-society organizations are observing this high-level plenary meeting from the gallery and are not permitted to address this forum, which is celebrating their work as human rights defenders, is a clear indication of how regressive policies are undermining the *raison d'être* of this institution. Reform and an openness to engage with civil society organizations in general, and with

human rights defenders in particular, are necessary at the United Nations itself if we want to better protect and honour human rights defenders.

We honour activist human rights defenders who work to protect the environment and those who confront corporate greed to preserve the collective right of their community to the land. We honour activist human rights defenders who are being criminalized, delegitimized or defamed for their work in saving lives at sea and protecting migrants. We honour activist human rights defenders who are criminalized, tortured or jailed for exercising their freedom of expression and opinion, especially through social media. We honour human rights defenders who are silenced for calling for free, fair and transparent elections and pursuing peaceful, democratic transitions. Finally, we honour activist human rights defenders, including lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and intersex defenders and women human rights defenders, who advocate for the right of all to live free and equal in dignity and rights.

Thirdly, regarding the urgent call for action directed at States and others, the Summit participants endorsed an action plan that identified priorities for States, businesses, financial institutions, donors and intergovernmental organizations. We call for action on the part of all those present here. States have a primary obligation to respect, protect and fulfil human rights and implement the human rights defenders Declaration, which was approved by consensus 20 years ago, yet they remain the main perpetrators of violations against human rights defenders, either directly or in complicity with non-State actors. Instead, States must take urgent action to recognize the essential role of human rights defenders, protect those at risk and take concrete measures to foster a safe and enabling environment, including through the adoption of national action plans for the protection of human rights defenders.

Civil-society organizations, through consultative processes facilitated by the International Service for Human Rights, produced a model law in 2016 for the recognition and protection of human rights defenders. States must also break the cycle of impunity by holding perpetrators to account for attacks against human rights defenders. Killings, criminalization and smear campaigns must stop.

United Nations bodies and agencies themselves should prioritize the protection of human rights defenders, while ensuring that United Nations

mechanisms are safe and accessible to defenders, that human rights defenders are free from intimidation and reprisals and that the United Nations makes the protection of human rights defenders paramount in the field. The death of Cao Shunli, the sexual assault and torture of Ebtisam Al-Saegh, the death threats against Hedme Castro and the arbitrary arrest of Khurram Parvez all happened because of their engagement with the United Nations. There must be a zero-tolerance policy on reprisals. Our action plan also includes recommendations to businesses, financial institutions and the donor community.

In conclusion, I am proud to be a human rights defender. I am proud of the efforts made by my colleagues every single day in communities across the globe. Human rights defenders work to make the world a fairer, more just and more peaceful place. In conclusion, I would like to quote from the first Human Rights Defenders World Summit press release in 1998:

“Through our daily fight, we are finding proof that utopia can become a reality. Anything that is impossible today, we will make possible tomorrow through the strength of our conviction, our determination and our actions.”

**The President** (*spoke in Spanish*): In accordance with the decision just taken, I now give the floor to the Special Envoy of the Global Alliance of National Human Rights Institutions.

**Ms. Simbiri-Jaoko** (Global Alliance of National Human Rights Institutions): I am grateful for the invitation extended to the Global Alliance of National Human Rights Institutions, which represents more than 100 national human rights institutions established by State parties in compliance with the Paris Principles, to speak at this event.

The 1998 United Nations Declaration on the Right and Responsibility of Individuals, Groups and Organs of Society to Promote and Protect Universally Recognized Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms was a critical step forward for the human rights movement in which the international community formally recognized the vital and legitimate role of human rights defenders and their contributions to peace and freedom for the first time. While setting out States' obligations and responsibilities, it recognized a global human rights movement in which all citizens have a role to play as human rights defenders.

Today, two decades later, significant progress has been made, such as the establishment of the mandate of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders to monitor and advise on the situation of human rights defenders. In addition, several States have enacted laws and established mechanisms to protect human rights defenders. Yet even as we celebrate the twentieth anniversary and the undeniable and immense contributions of human rights defenders to the advancement of human rights, it remains true that the civic space, freedoms and human rights defenders themselves face significant pressures and threats across all the regions of the world.

Last year the Global Alliance received and expressed concern about reports of reprisals and other acts of intimidation that national human rights institutions and their staff in all regions faced for undertaking human rights work in line with their mandates. The Alliance and the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), as well as the United Nations Development Programme, have a memorandum of understanding on responding to such threats.

As a result, our thirteenth international conference, held in Marrakech in October and co-hosted by the National Human Rights Council of Morocco in collaboration with OHCHR, focused on expanding the civic space and promoting and protecting human rights defenders, with a specific focus on women and the role of national human rights institutions, in recognition of the increased gender-specific discrimination and violence faced by women human rights defenders at the hands of State and non-State actors.

Subsequently, the members of the Global Alliance adopted the Marrakech declaration, which reaffirmed the United Nations Declaration on human rights defenders as the international normative framework for human rights defenders and appealed for its continued support and implementation by all States parties, and also agreed that human rights and fundamental freedoms, including the right to freedom of expression, peaceful assembly and association and the right to participate, are fundamental to the existence and nature of peaceful and inclusive societies, providing a channel that allows for dialogue, pluralism and tolerance, and that they are preconditions for the enjoyment of human rights by all.

Human rights defenders have a positive, important and legitimate role to play in contributing to the realization of all human rights at the local, national, regional and international levels, including by engaging with Governments and contributing to the implementation of obligations and commitments. Independent, effective and Paris Principles-compliant national human rights institutions, as well as their staff members, are human rights defenders. They therefore play an important role in promoting and protecting human rights for all by contributing to safeguarding and promoting the civic space and protecting human rights defenders, particularly women human rights defenders.

Critical to the work of human rights defenders is the need to safeguard and protect the civic space with all the attendant rights of freedom of speech, assembly and association. We must all be wary and act collectively against the persistent and unprecedented threats to enabling environments for human rights defenders. Paris Principles-compliant national human rights institutions, civil society, the media, independent judiciaries and legal practitioners work tirelessly to ensure the compliance of both State and non-State actors with those values and principles, some under serious threats to their very existence. They need the highest level of commitment to, and recognition of, their legitimate role and contribution to the advancement of human rights where it matters most — at the local level, for the benefit of the most vulnerable members of our communities.

We believe that a redoubling of efforts and vigilance by the General Assembly to ensure the safe and inclusive participation in the affairs of their States of all stakeholders, including human rights defenders and national human rights institutions, will send a strong signal to those bent on clawing back the hard-earned gains that so many have made sacrifices to achieve, sometimes paying with their own lives, in pursuit of a better world and for the benefit of all of us here today as well as those going about their day-to-day business all over the world.

**The President** (*spoke in Spanish*): Before proceeding further, I would like to appeal to all speakers to make their interventions brief and concise in order to make maximum use of the limited time we have for this high-level meeting. To enable everyone on the list of speakers to be heard, statements in plenary meetings should be limited to three minutes when speaking in a national capacity and five minutes when speaking

on behalf of a group. I therefore strongly encourage speakers to deliver concise statements, for which the full versions may be submitted to the Secretariat for posting on the PaperSmart portal.

I now give the floor to the observer of the European Union.

**Mr. Christiane** (European Union): The European Union (EU) and its member States are pleased to join the celebration today of the twentieth anniversary 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, just one week after we celebrated the seventieth anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. When the civil-society space is under tremendous pressure in many countries, even here at the United Nations, and when violence and reprisals against those who speak up for human rights are increasingly prevalent, global partnerships on those issues are all the more important.

We commend the President of the General Assembly and the Permanent Missions of Argentina, Italy and Norway for their efforts in preparing this event, with the broad participation of civil society. We also welcome the steadfast engagement of the Secretary-General, the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders, and other mandate-holders in their work to support human rights defenders around the globe.

We particularly want to use this occasion to express our thanks and gratitude to all human rights defenders for their courageous work on the ground and their exemplary commitment to making “all human rights for all” a reality. They are all truly courageous champions of the spirit of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The work of human rights defenders fighting for their rights and the rights of others is the very embodiment of the promotion and protection of human rights.

Twenty years on from the Declaration’s adoption, human rights defenders are still facing increasing attacks and often pay a high price for their work. That should concern us all and inspire us all to make a renewed commitment to action. In that respect, we condemn all forms of reprisals against human rights defenders. We also welcome the designation of a focal point to lead United Nations efforts to put an end to

intimidation and reprisals against those cooperating with the United Nations on human rights.

The Declaration on human rights defenders that we are commemorating today is a powerful text. It sets out the rights held by defenders and the protections to which they are entitled. With that in mind, we encourage all Member States to support the Declaration, its significance and its scope. Human rights defenders are forcibly silenced, prevented from working, branded as terrorists or foreign agents and face threats to their lives and their families’ well-being.

As several speakers have already mentioned, according to the Special Rapporteur’s report on the situation of human rights defenders (A/73/215), 1,000 human rights defenders were murdered between 2015 and 2017. One thousand murders in two years is unacceptable. We must therefore ensure that those responsible for those killings are held accountable. Mechanisms should be put in place to protect defenders from threats and reprisals and must function properly. They should both respond to emergency situations and establish long-term operational modalities. That is the only way to ensure that defenders are systematically and comprehensively protected and to enable them to carry out the vital role they play in a democratic society in which the rule of law and human rights are respected.

The European Union is deeply committed to the protection of human rights defenders. The EU assists them in their work and provides strong mechanisms for their protection, including in situations of immediate danger. The EU has allocated more than €3 million in grants for emergency protection and has assisted more than 550 human rights defenders in critical situations. The EU also supports local civil-society organizations in their work to advance human rights and fight violations and abuses by providing long-term support to defenders worldwide.

In order to highlight this, the EU and the United States co-hosted a panel discussion in New York in November, which featured two human rights defenders — Teng Biao, a Chinese lawyer, academic and anti-death-penalty activist, and Hauwa Ibrahim, a Nigerian human rights lawyer and professor, who was also awarded the Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought in 2005.

On that note, I also want to acknowledge the work and life of Lyudmila Mikhaylovna Alexeyeva, the winner of the Sakharov Prize in 2009 and founding member

of the Moscow Helsinki Group. She passed away last week, and I offer my condolences to her family. She dedicated her life's work to defending human rights and developing the human rights landscape we know today.

We also congratulate this year's Sakharov Prize winner, Oleg Sentsov and this year's Nobel Peace Prize laureates, Denis Mukwege and Nadia Murad. Let us be inspired by their work and the work of all those other human rights defenders who make the Declaration a living instrument. To quote the words of Hauwa Ibrahim,

"I may be the next victim. If I do not fight for victims now, how are they going to fight for me then?"

**Mr. Kyslytsya (Ukraine):** I would like to thank the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights and, even if it takes up most of my three minutes of allotted time, I would like to express my appreciation for what I saw in Santiago on my last visit, which was the Museum of Memory and Human Rights, to which Ms. Bachelet contributed significant political and personal efforts in order to make it a reality. I mention that because there can be no democracy without human rights, and no human rights without memory. I would like to use this opportunity to speak in memory of the millions of my fellow citizens who died 85 years ago.

Eighty-five years ago, the fundamental human rights and freedoms of Ukrainians were trampled by the Soviet Government, when large-scale repression and discriminatory and ruthless laws and policies, including Russification, targeted the Ukrainian nation with the sole aim of terrorizing it into submission to the Stalinist totalitarian regime. To commemorate that tragedy, the delegations of 39 States Members of the United Nations recently signed the Declaration on the Eighty-Fifth Anniversary of the Holodomor of 1932-1933 in Ukraine, which reads:

"The delegations of Albania, Australia, Austria, Azerbaijan, Belgium, Bulgaria, Canada, Chile, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Georgia, Germany, Hungary, Iceland, Ireland, Israel, Italy, Latvia, Liechtenstein, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Moldova, Monaco, Montenegro, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Ukraine, the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and the United States of America do solemnly declare,

"Guided by the principles embodied in the Charter of the United Nations, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights as well as in other relevant international instruments in the field of human rights that affirm the right to life, liberty and security of person...

"Being convinced that the tragedy of the Holodomor should be a reminder for present and future generations to unconditionally respect human rights, including the right to life, in order to prevent the repetition of such tragedies...

"Recalling in this regard the joint statement (A/C.3/58/9 and Add.1)...

"Recalling the resolution on remembrance of victims of the Great Famine (Holodomor) in Ukraine 1932-1933, adopted on 1 November 2007 by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO),

"Recognizing the importance of raising public awareness of the tragic events in the history of humankind...

"1. Commemorate the memory of the victims of the Holodomor...

"2. Condemn the cruel policies pursued by the Stalinist regime, such as forced collectivization and food requisition...

"3. Pay tribute to the memory of millions of persons of other nationalities who died of starvation and political repression in other parts of the former Soviet Union;

"4. Welcome the efforts of Governments to open their archives on the events of 1932-1933...

"5. Emphasize that the memories of past horrors and atrocities should reinforce the efforts of the international community to ensure unconditional observance of human rights and fundamental freedoms throughout the world..."

Raising awareness of the horrors of the Great Famine of 1932-1933 at the international level is also one of the ways of ensuring that such crimes of the past are not repeated in the future.

My full statement will be submitted to the PaperSmart portal.

**Mrs. Zappia** (Italy): I would like to express my gratitude to you, Madam President, as well as to the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders, and all of the human rights defenders for their statements.

Italy aligns itself with the statement just delivered by the observer of the European Union (EU), and I would like to add a few remarks in my national capacity.

A few months ago, when the President of the General Assembly asked my friends the Permanent Representatives of Argentina and Norway and myself to conduct consultations with the United Nations membership to define the scope and modalities of today's high-level meeting, I knew the road ahead would not be easy. At the same time, I felt that by accepting that request, Italy could make a concrete contribution to making this important event possible. I am therefore honoured and happy to have been able to help create this space to consider our reflections on the many challenges facing human rights defenders.

Today we have a golden opportunity to highlight the role of the United Nations in promoting human rights and the rights of human rights defenders. Indeed, we believe that multilateral forums such as the United Nations, the EU, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and the Council of Europe represent the most effective tools for promoting common standards, fostering dialogue and monitoring respect for human rights worldwide. Italy promotes an open and inclusive approach to human rights focused on the ownership of local actors and cooperation with civil society. Our goal is to identify best practices for the protection of human rights defenders and to raise awareness of related issues.

Following EU guidelines, Italy has long been committed to creating a safe and enabling environment for human rights defenders to be able to operate, free from hindrance and insecurity. In that framework, our Government has issued clear instructions to all of our Embassies to ensure that they provide periodic updates on the situation of human rights defenders in their country of accreditation in order to closely monitor the situation on the ground. The promotion of the rights of human rights defenders and their protection from attacks, threats and all forms of reprisals is also one of the priorities of Italy's term in the Human Rights Council over the next three years. We must raise

awareness on human rights issues and encourage higher standards of protection, since they play a crucial role at the local, national, regional and international levels.

Italy promotes an open dialogue with civil-society organizations in the belief that a vibrant civil society contributes to inclusive and pluralistic societies, stability and prosperity. In June, as part of this dialogue, under Italy's chairmanship of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, we organized an international workshop on the protection of human rights defenders, best practices and the role of Italy. The event was an important opportunity for exchanging views and best practices with representatives of the OSCE, the EU and civil society on the protection of human right defenders; analysing the EU and OSCE guidelines on human rights defenders, with a view to improving their implementation; exchanging best practices with other countries; and identifying proposals to improve coordination among the OSCE, the EU and its member States in human rights defenders-related activities.

Finally, Italy urges the international community to pay special attention to the protection of women and children human rights defenders. They should be afforded additional support and much stronger protection.

**Mr. Verdier** (Argentina) (*spoke in Spanish*): 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, Argentina believes it essential to promote the implementation of the Declaration's provisions in order to ensure the effective protection of human rights defenders in carrying out their day-to-day work.

Argentina supports the work being done by human rights defenders at the national, regional and international levels and recognizes their valuable contribution to the protection, promotion and respect of human rights and fundamental freedoms. We want to underscore the positive and legitimate role that human rights defenders play in ensuring accountability, respect for human rights standards, support for the victims of human rights violations and for capacity-building and awareness-raising activities, among countless other tasks.

We particularly want to acknowledge their constant struggle for a more peaceful, just and inclusive world, which has enabled our societies to achieve important

progress in advancing the protection of human rights for us all, especially the most vulnerable groups. Argentina condemns all acts that directly or indirectly impede or hinder the work carried out by human rights defenders and urges the States Members of the United Nations to intensify their efforts with a view to adopting the necessary measures to guarantee the life, personal integrity and freedom of expression of human rights defenders, through their national legislation and in accordance with international human rights law.

**Mr. Blanchard** (Canada): The commemoration of the twentieth anniversary 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 provides a great opportunity to reflect on the progress that has been made and the challenges and opportunities ahead.

Hearing speakers before me essentially say that the situation for human rights defenders has seldom, if ever, been as bad as it is now, I thought how humbling are the circumstances in which we are here, supposedly to celebrate this twentieth anniversary. As a world, we ought to do better. As the United Nations, we certainly must think harder about what we should do. As Member States, we must all question our roles and approaches.

The Declaration was a milestone in the recognition of the important work carried out by human rights defenders and the need to create a safe and enabling environment and to provide them with protection. It recognized the legitimacy of their activities, defining human rights defenders by what they do, which is promoting and protecting human rights and fundamental freedoms by peaceful means, regardless of sex, gender, age, race, colour, religion, national or social origin or any other grounds for discrimination.

Human rights defenders must be able to act freely and without any interference, intimidation, abuse, threats, violence or reprisals. Internationally recognized human rights, such as the right to freedom of expression, assembly and association, are cornerstone principles of their work. They are clearly enshrined in the Declaration on human rights defenders. Let us not forget that that Declaration was adopted by all of us by consensus — by all the States Members of the United Nations.

Yet as has been said, the levels of harassment, intimidation and reprisals they face, including in a

digital context, are alarming. Human rights defenders are increasingly attacked, often as a result of their work. Women, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex persons, indigenous populations and youth human rights defenders are particularly vulnerable and face additional threats and challenges. Attacks on human rights defenders are attacks on everyone's human rights. No one should ever be threatened or face violence for peacefully promoting human rights or expressing ideas and opinions.

*(spoke in French)*

We urge Member States to put an end to the attacks on human rights defenders and to provide them with a safe space in which to carry out their work, across all regions and all areas of their activities. Canada will continue to support human rights defenders and the rules-based international order. We believe in those values, enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Declaration on human rights defenders. We must all respect the rules that we have established together if we are to prevent violence and sustain peace.

We remain committed to working with our partners to support human rights defenders. In that regard, Canada's guidelines on providing support for human rights defenders aim to support Canadian missions in their efforts to promote the work of human rights defenders. They are an important tool in the promotion and protection of human rights and form an integral part of Canada's foreign policy. We therefore support the call of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders to establish United Nations guidelines to that end. We will continue our efforts in that direction with other Member States.

We celebrate the vital work that human rights defenders carry out every day around the world, as well as their commitment and their courage to advocate for and defend the human rights of others. By the very nature of their work, human rights defenders contribute to achieving the goals and principles enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and to preserving the rule-based international order that we, the States Members of the United Nations, have built together.

**Mr. Wenaweser** (Liechtenstein): 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

is a landmark document. It recognizes the central importance of the work of human rights defenders for the effective promotion and protection of all human rights. It makes the statement that in addition to the obligation of States, every human being, individually or collectively, has a right and responsibility to strive for the protection and realization of human rights and fundamental freedoms. Today is also the fifth anniversary of the first-ever United Nations resolution on the protection of women human rights defenders, resolution 68/181, which substantially complements the Declaration and significantly contributes to the empowerment of women.

Civil-society actors play an essential role in promoting and protecting human rights at all levels. They engage with Governments and assist in the implementation of the obligations and commitments undertaken by States, including human rights treaties adopted by the United Nations. They work to secure accountability for violations of human rights and fundamental freedoms. Our civil society actively contributes both at the national and international levels. Our national human rights institution, established in accordance with the Paris Principles, is fully functional and contributes to awareness-raising, public discourse and respect for human rights. The All Survivors Project, the first international civil-society organization based in Liechtenstein, conducts research and undertakes advocacy to prevent and respond to sexual violence, including against men and boys. We are encouraged to see effective civil-society engagement elsewhere and welcome the fact that the resources for the promotion and protection of human rights defenders have increased in the past two decades, both within the United Nations system and elsewhere.

Much as we should celebrate the achievements of human rights defenders — and we have great reason to praise their courage — we also have significant concerns about their safety. We are disturbed by the increasing intimidation, threats, harassment, attacks and killings of individuals who fight for the enjoyment of all human rights and fundamental freedoms. It is shocking that since the adoption of the Declaration, at least 3,500 human rights defenders have been killed for their role in the struggle for human rights. Women human rights defenders are disproportionately affected by gender-specific threats and violence and often face hostility and stigmatization.

We strongly condemn reprisals against human rights defenders in retaliation for their engagement with international and regional human rights systems. The United Nations system has a responsibility to counter such reprisals, and we strongly support the work of the focal point established by the Human Rights Council. We are also deeply concerned about the increasing number of assaults on journalists who fight for human rights, including their arbitrary imprisonment and killing. Promoting the rights and freedoms of all human rights defenders and combating impunity for those who attack them must be a priority for the Organization.

**Mr. Delattre** (France) (*spoke in French*): On this twentieth anniversary 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, we pay tribute to the women and men who embody the spirit of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948. I commend the courage of the lawyers, community activists, journalists and whistle-blowers who fight for the freedom, dignity and rights of all. In order to carry and amplify their voice, the establishment of independent national human rights institutions that respect the Paris Principles and a strong judicial system is essential.

Let us not limit ourselves to mere words. Human rights defenders are by definition those who disturb and denounce. They are working in our countries, from north to south, to ensure that States strengthen the protection of all rights. Human rights defenders, who by their very nature create inconvenience, are therefore threatened and must as a result be supported and protected. That is always the case, whether it is a matter of women's rights, including sexual and reproductive rights, the protection of the environment and the climate, the rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex people, migrants, indigenous peoples or those who are vulnerable as a result of extreme poverty or discrimination based on their gender, origin, beliefs or convictions.

At this commemoration, let us make a collective commitment, as we did 20 years ago, to doing our utmost to ensure that the Declaration is fully implemented so that human rights defenders, especially women, can carry out their work independently and without risk of reprisals, harassment or intimidation, including on the Internet.



France has made that commitment. That is why Paris hosted the Human Rights Defenders World Summit between 29 and 31 October, bringing together more than 150 human rights defenders from a range of backgrounds, as well as the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, Ms. Michelle Bachelet, and the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders, Mr. Michel Forst, whose exemplary commitment has our full and unwavering support. On 10 December, our Minister for Europe and Foreign Affairs, Jean-Yves Le Drian, introduced our human rights and development strategy. From 2019, our official development assistance policy will be mobilized even further in support of human rights defenders, including by funding concrete projects, in line with the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its Sustainable Development Goal 16, in particular.

Ms. Hina Jilani, whom I was very pleased to hear speak here, shared her optimism with the human rights defenders present in Paris, saying,

“As a movement, we have never been as global as we are now. But we have to be clear to States that they need to live up to the challenge.”

As worthy heirs of the authors of the Declarations that we are celebrating today, let us live up to that call. Those Declarations are the pillars of the multilateral structure that we have built together, stone by stone, over almost 75 years. Let us continue to strengthen it and be its craftsmen, like the visionaries before us.

**Ms. Krisnamurthi** (Indonesia): At the outset, my delegation would like to express its deep appreciation to the President of the General Assembly for convening this high-level 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. We would also like to express our deep appreciation to the Secretary-General, the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, the Special Rapporteur and all other speakers who have addressed the General Assembly today.

Indonesia affirms the overriding importance of human rights and fundamental freedoms. Our Constitution and laws are built around the principles of universality, objectivity, indivisibility, non-selectivity, non-politicization and the interdependence of those rights. Our Constitution guarantees the protection and

promotion of human rights for all. Since our journey of democratic reform — known to us as *reformasi* — began in 1998, Indonesia’s vibrant civil society has continued to play a meaningful role in the promotion of human rights and democracy. Human rights activists enjoy ample freedom to conduct activities. The Government also continues to provide robust space for civil society to function independently. All human rights defenders, whether non-governmental activists, teachers, doctors, social workers, judges, prosecutors, farmers, police officers or military officers, are protected equally under the law.

I am pleased to be able to point out that the protection of human rights defenders was reaffirmed during Indonesia’s third cycle of the Universal Periodic Review in the Human Rights Council. But it is also our belief that, in the best interests of human rights as a common gift, synergy among the contributions of State and non-State actors is indispensable. The integrity of the State apparatus and law enforcers is also being greatly enhanced through capacity-building programmes and the integration of human rights curricula.

We are also undertaking various activities to raise awareness for a better understanding of the work of human rights defenders. Recently, the Government cooperated with national civil-society organizations and held a national dialogue on that issue. Institutional and legislative reforms have also been put in place that integrate human rights principles. A proposed amendment to our Law No. 39 of 1999 on human rights includes a definition of human rights defenders and the roles of the National Commission on Human Rights, the Witness and Victim Protection Agency and other relevant institutions in protecting human rights defenders.

Achieving a balance between rights and responsibility is delicate but necessary. That is why we need a balanced discussion on the issue of human rights defenders. Serving the community and protecting public order must also be given serious consideration in achieving that balance. We are therefore concerned about the fact that State apparatuses are increasingly coming under attack in the course of their duties to promote and protect human rights, serve the community and protect public order.

To conclude, we would like to highlight that the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Declaration on Human Rights Defenders also

emphasize the need for a balance in which the principles of human rights and human dignity apply equally to all human beings.

**Mr. Rosselli Frieri** (Uruguay) (*spoke in Spanish*): I want to bring up a basic, fundamental and essential concept in all our lives — freedom. Freedom, in the broadest possible sense, means the ability of human beings to choose — to choose their destiny as individuals, to choose the type of society in which they wish to live, to choose who governs them, to choose their spouse, to choose a religion or no religion. It is that ability to choose that establishes the context for human rights, as recognized in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948 and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights of 1966.

Despite those instruments, in order to fully achieve freedom it is always essential to ensure that mere declarations translate into the full exercise of people's rights. We can categorically affirm that where there is no freedom, human rights are violated in their entirety. In that regard, Uruguay underscores that it is the responsibility of Governments to guarantee and promote the enjoyment of human rights for those living within their territories.

Uruguay wants to stress that the role of human rights defenders is essential to a democratic and pluralist society. The space for the participation of human rights defenders must be not merely guaranteed but protected and promoted by the authorities. That requires the creation of an enabling and safe environment, with an appropriate legal framework that accords with international human rights standards and respects the right of every person to promote, develop and protect human rights, whether their own or others', by legal and peaceful means.

Human rights defenders play a positive, important and legitimate role in promoting and fostering the upholding of all human rights at the local, national, regional and international levels. We must also recognize the important role that human rights defenders play in conflict prevention, peacebuilding and sustainable development through dialogue, openness, participation and justice, particularly by monitoring the situation of all civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights, submitting reports in that regard and contributing to the promotion of those rights.

Uruguay is deeply concerned about the widespread attacks on human rights defenders and the lack of robust

and ambitious political measures aimed at putting an end to that situation, as stated in the reports of the Special Rapporteur. We reject attempts to impede the work of civil society through mechanisms of intimidation or repression, within or outside their countries of origin, as well as the implementation of rules that unduly obstruct or limit their work. It is essential to ensure that States guarantee the security of those who cooperate with the international system for the protection of human rights and take the necessary measures to prevent impunity for acts of violence against those individuals or groups.

We must also strengthen the coordinated response of the United Nations system in cases of reprisals. In that regard, Uruguay reiterates its strong support for the work of the Assistant Secretary-General for Human Rights in receiving, considering and responding to allegations of intimidation or reprisals against those who cooperate or seek to cooperate with the work of the United Nations.

**Mrs. Blokar Drobič** (Slovenia): It is an honour to address the Assembly on the occasion of the twentieth anniversary 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.

I first want to align myself with the statement delivered earlier by the observer of the European Union.

I would like to express Slovenia's appreciation for the work and the courage of human rights defenders, particularly women human rights defenders. Their work is indispensable, not only for the understanding of often complex situations on the ground and for achieving progress in the area of human rights but also, most importantly, for every person living in such situations. I also want to take this opportunity to extend our heartfelt congratulations to the recipients of the United Nations Prize in the Field of Human Rights.

Over the past 20 years we have gained some experience that can help us evaluate the progress and challenges of previous decades and, more importantly, draw some important conclusions for the future. Despite the progress that has been achieved, we must recognize that human rights defenders are often faced with situations that not only hinder their work but put their lives in grave danger. It is unacceptable that in many parts of the world, human rights defenders still risk exposure, or are exposed, to discrimination, threats of violence, mistreatment, abuse and even criminalization.

Slovenia remains deeply concerned about the ongoing limitations of the civil-society space and reported reprisals against individuals and groups. Civil-society organizations play an indispensable role in the promotion and protection of human rights, and States must therefore ensure space for their functioning, including by enabling them to seek and receive funding. Although the Declaration on human rights defenders is not a legally binding instrument, it is a document that enshrines all the relevant principles of international human rights law. The Slovenian Government is committed to an active and open cooperation with civil society. Such a partnership makes an important contribution to good governance, transparency and mutual accountability. It is important that States have in place the mechanisms and institutions necessary for the protection of human rights defenders. I would like to mention just a few of our national examples.

In 2011 our capital, Ljubljana, became a member of the International Cities of Refuge Network, which provides shelter to writers and artists at risk. With a view to strengthening the independence and effectiveness of the Human Rights Ombudsman, in September of last year the National Assembly amended our national legislation to establish a centre for human rights and the Council of Human Rights, an advisory body to the Ombudsman for the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms and the strengthening of legal security. It operates according to the principle of professional autonomy. Lastly, our independent national equality body for combating discrimination became operational in January last year.

In conclusion, I want to remember all the individuals who have lost their lives advocating for human rights and a better future free from fear, discrimination and violence for all. The sacrifice of those brave women and men must never be forgotten. Their work has changed the lives of thousands and inspires us to continue the fight for a better and more peaceful tomorrow for all.

**Mr. Grout-Smith** (United Kingdom): At the outset, I would like to thank you, Madam President, along with Norway, Argentina and Italy, for organizing this important meeting. I was particularly pleased to hear the statements of Ms. Jilani, Ms. Mogwe and Ms. Simbiri-Jaoko. They and their fellow human rights defenders are the lifeblood of democracy and human rights. Without them, the work that we do in this Hall would not have nearly the same effect or reach.

In that light, we welcome those defenders who have been able to join us here today, both from the Economic and Social Council and from accredited and non-accredited non-governmental organizations. We regret the opposition to their full participation that some Member States have voiced. The attempts to restrict the voices that are at the centre of this event are deeply concerning. We benefit enormously when members of civil society are present and talking, often at first hand, about human rights violations, holding us as States to account and suggesting ways to resolve issues. That access is particularly critical for those facing restrictions at the national level.

We come together today to celebrate the twentieth anniversary of the United Nations Declaration on the Right and Responsibility of Individuals, Groups and Organs of Society to Promote and Protect Universally Recognized Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms against a backdrop in which more than 300 defenders have been killed this year alone, with many more imprisoned, tortured or persecuted for the work they do standing up for the rights of others. We cannot continue to turn a blind eye to such outrages. Human rights defenders are under attack as never before. That is why it is so important that we take action. For our part, we have put in place United Kingdom guidelines on human rights defenders in order to support them wherever we can, either publicly or privately, across the globe and to work closely with them to better understand the challenges they face.

Increasingly, media freedom is also under attack. Journalists play a vital role in shining a light on abuses and violations of human rights. That is why the Foreign Secretary of the United Kingdom is championing the issue of media freedom and the safety of journalists, and we will step up work with all countries that share those concerns. Human rights defenders need our support. The United Kingdom commends the important work of Special Rapporteur Forst in highlighting violations against human rights defenders. We have seen much progress over the past 20 years, but there remains much more to be done. I would therefore like to issue a challenge to my colleagues here today. Let us work together to secure the positive changes set out in the Declaration. They would enable human rights defenders to fight for human rights and allow civil society the space to engage with and, where needed, challenge Governments without fear of reprisals. Let us create an environment where full democracy can flourish. Today

we salute human rights defenders everywhere. To those human rights defenders in the Hall today, I want to say that the United Kingdom will always stand with them.

**Mr. Santos Maraver** (Spain) (*spoke in Spanish*): Spain joins in the celebration of the twentieth anniversary 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. My country would once again like to express its gratitude for the work of human rights defenders and the courage that they are so often obliged to demonstrate.

For Spain, an active civil society is an essential element of a genuine democracy. In that regard, we believe that the Declaration on human rights defenders meant the recognition of such individuals and groups as essential actors in the realization of human rights. Unfortunately, 20 years after the adoption of the Declaration, the threats that human rights defenders face have not diminished. The fact that 3,500 of them have been killed since then, according to the latest report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders (see A/73/215), is the clearest proof that there is still a long way to go.

While progress has been made in recent years in the creation of legal frameworks for their protection, there have also been alarming developments such as the growing criminalization of human rights defenders, the closing of the civic space, limitations imposed on freedom of expression, regulations restricting the work of non-governmental organizations and their access to funds, and the situation of certain groups of human rights defenders who are particularly persecuted, such as women human rights defenders and those defending the environment.

Promoting and protecting the legitimate activities of human rights defenders are priorities for Spain's foreign policy in the field of human rights. We have also reflected that strong commitment in concrete actions, four of which we would like to highlight. The first is a referral of the situation of human rights defenders during the Universal Periodic Review process; the second, our grant of subsidies for activities related to the dissemination and support of the work carried out by human rights defenders; the third, meetings with human rights defenders and a monitoring of their situation by our embassies, in accordance with the European Union guidelines; and the last is support for

the mandate of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders. Spain also has a protection programme that enables us to temporarily host human rights defenders at risk. Since the programme came into force, more than 300 human rights defenders have been able to benefit from it.

In conclusion, I want to reiterate Spain's strong support for the actions of United Nations bodies to promote and implement the Declaration that we are celebrating today. In that regard, the Assembly can rest assured that Spain will spare no effort in ensuring that those actions, in line with the report submitted by the Secretary-General at the seventy-third session of the General Assembly (A/73/230), are increasingly robust and effective.

**Mr. Lauber** (Switzerland) (*spoke in French*): Twenty years after its adoption, 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 remains a founding and landmark text, as it affirms and acknowledges the crucial importance of the individuals and groups who are committed to the promotion and realization of human rights.

Switzerland welcomes the convening of this high-level plenary meeting. We want to reiterate the fact that civil society makes a significant contribution to the work of the United Nations and plays a crucial role in the functioning of the multilateral system, including the United Nations system. Switzerland therefore attaches particular importance to ensuring the inclusion and active participation of civil society, including non-governmental organizations and human rights defenders, in United Nations institutions.

The protection of human rights defenders is a priority of our foreign policy in the field of human rights. Switzerland provided political and financial support to the Human Rights Defenders World Summit held in Paris in October. We actively engaged in the negotiation of the relevant resolutions adopted by the Human Rights Council and the Third Committee of the General Assembly. We want to take this opportunity to commend all human rights defenders, including and in particular those in detention, for their outstanding work and courage, as well as to assure them of our support.

Despite the progress made at the multilateral level, including the adoption of the Declaration 20 years ago, Switzerland is deeply concerned that human

rights defenders are increasingly targets of repression, intimidation, threats and attacks. In that context, their recognition and protection are of paramount importance. Given that next year marks the thirtieth anniversary of the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the fortieth of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, we want to underscore the positive role of women and children who are committed to defending human rights.

Switzerland calls on all States to guarantee a safe and enabling environment for human rights defenders and ensure that they can to carry out their activities, including through participation in international mechanisms, without being subject to reprisals.

**Mr. Margaryan** (Armenia): I would like to join others in thanking you, Madam President, for convening this meeting and to acknowledge today's speakers' insightful contributions.

Since its adoption 20 years ago, 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 has provided an important legal framework for individuals and groups standing up against injustice, while also advancing human rights and strengthening the collaboration among Governments, civil society and local and international institutions. This year also marks the seventieth anniversary of two landmark documents, the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, yet another milestone moment when we can recommit to cooperating in favour of dialogue, peace and reconciliation and stepping up our collective efforts to uphold human rights and human dignity.

These anniversaries are also an important reminder of the critical role that the protection and promotion of human rights plays in our implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and our ability to foster a global environment in which all people can exercise their fundamental freedoms free from discrimination on any grounds. The goal of protecting human rights and human dignity is as relevant and important as ever. Systematic and gross violations of human rights, the use of force and coercion of any kind and a lack of international protection are among the main factors fuelling the increased risks to life.

Armenia remains strongly committed to advancing prevention, including the prevention of identity-

based discrimination, mass atrocities and the crime of genocide. We want to highlight the important role of human rights defenders in acting as preventive mechanisms and identifying early-warning signs of deteriorating human rights situations on the ground. We strongly condemn attacks, violence and intimidation in any form against human rights defenders and activists, including journalists, reporters and media workers.

Upholding human rights and human dignity has been central to the fundamental democratic transformation in Armenia, as manifested by our peaceful, velvet revolution in April and May this year. In what has been identified by the Secretary-General as a fantastic example of the peaceful transfer of power, the youth and women in Armenia stood at the forefront of the non-violent, democratic process, in full exercise of their human rights and fundamental freedoms, as was also recently acknowledged in the observations of the Special Rapporteur on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association.

Fostering meaningful participation in civic life on behalf of all groups, including women and young people, strengthening the rule of law and the independence of the judiciary, fighting corruption and promoting equal and fair conditions for participation in economic, political and social life have been at the core of the transformative changes in Armenia. We are striving to translate those priorities into actions in our domestic agenda and internationally. With that in mind, Armenia has presented its candidacy for membership in the Human Rights Council for the years 2020 to 2022.

The ongoing reforms of the United Nations system embrace the overarching agenda of the Secretary-General for prioritizing prevention with a more proactive approach. Armenia is determined to continue to contribute to multilateral efforts to advance the mutually reinforcing agendas preventing grave violations of human rights and protecting and promoting them.

**Mr. De Soto** (Colombia) (*spoke in Spanish*): At this twentieth anniversary 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, Colombia reaffirms its commitment to the promotion and protection of the work of human rights defenders. We recognize that our full realization of human rights depends on cooperation between States and the

international community, as well as all individuals and groups committed to defending those rights.

The Declaration offers a description of the activities and rights of human rights defenders and establishes the duty of States to provide them with guarantees in carrying out their work, while in their turn defenders have an obligation to carry out their activities peacefully. The Declaration also clearly states that everyone has the right, individually and in association with others, to promote and seek the protection and realization of human rights and fundamental freedoms at the national and international levels. It therefore proposes a broad approach that enables all individuals to potentially be human rights defenders.

Colombia recognizes the work of human rights defenders in strengthening a democratic State. In that regard, we firmly condemn attacks and accusations that endanger the lives and integrity of human rights defenders. Over the past 20 years, the provisions of the Declaration have been further developed, for example by including non-State actors in the protection of human rights defenders. It is essential that we continue working to ensure that the work of human rights defenders is not stigmatized.

It is also essential to intensify social dialogue and strengthen prevention mechanisms. Examples such as those that we have been implementing in Colombia, including a new prevention and early-warning system that enables various State institutions to coordinate their actions in order to prevent acts that put human rights defenders at risk because of their work, can serve as good practices and lessons learned for other parts of the world that are facing similar threats. We must continue to redouble our efforts to accelerate progress in protecting and promoting the work of those who devote themselves to defending human rights, with a view to making the content of the Declaration that we are celebrating today a reality.

**Mr. Cooreman** (Belgium): This month of December has brought us all together on several occasions to commemorate two historic birthdays, the seventieth anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, last week, and today's twentieth anniversary 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. Both documents embody the fundamental steps for establishing a framework

for the promotion and protection of human rights and democracy, and we commend the men and women who are working every day to make them a reality.

Belgium recognizes the crucial role of human rights defenders. They are courageous, indispensable and often inspirational allies when it comes to promoting and defending human rights around the world. As the Secretary-General said earlier today, it is important to recognize their commitment to giving a voice to the voiceless and shining a light on the dark corners of the globe.

We salute those courageous individuals all the more because their work is often dangerous. The space for civil society is shrinking in a number of countries. Critical voices are too often silenced. An increasing number of human rights defenders are under pressure, with many facing attacks, threats, harassment and insecurity. In the past two years, according to the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders (see A/73/215), more than 1,000 human rights defenders have been killed. Let us reflect on that for a moment. More than 1,000 people have been killed for defending the very human rights that are enshrined in one of the most fundamental documents of the United Nations. The perpetrators of those crimes should be held responsible. We as Governments should fulfil our collective responsibility to defend human rights, thereby creating a safe and enabling environment for civil-society organizations and human rights defenders.

My country would like to take this opportunity to salute the work of Mr. Michel Forst, the United Nations system's focal point on reprisals and Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders. Belgium, together with the European Union, will continue to engage in efforts at all levels in order to improve support for the diverse community of human rights defenders.

**Mr. Al Khalil** (Syrian Arab Republic) (*spoke in Arabic*): This year marks the seventieth anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Its adoption, and the subsequent adoption of further human rights instruments, was an important step in the promotion and protection of human rights and a successful part of the efforts of the United Nations to save future generations from the scourge of war. However, we must now ask ourselves whether we have succeeded in achieving that goal, or whether our success consists merely in having adopted various instruments.

This anniversary provides an opportunity for us to look at the human rights situation in general.

We note that there are many relevant instruments and mechanisms in place. However, they have regrettably become tools that certain States use to threaten other countries whenever they wish. We see Governments proclaiming slogans about human rights, democracy and the rule of law while at the same time frequently attacking other sovereign States and members of this Organization under various pretexts, including by imposing unilateral coercive measures that kill hundreds of thousands of civilians and displace millions more in order to serve their narrow interests and colonial ambitions while ensuring Israel's continued occupation of Arab territories and its criminal practices against the people who live in them.

We see certain Governments that sponsor terrorism, spread extremist terrorist ideology and violate human rights being praised by senior officials of our international Organization for their role in combating terrorism and promoting harmony among civilizations. Of course, that is a result of flagrant and blatant bribery by States with petrodollars. Those Governments demand accountability and justice while at the same time joining hands with murderers and hailing their crimes. Noble values and human rights have become tools for political manipulation and for covering up serious violations of international law and the Charter of the United Nations. The handling of human rights issues has become selective, blatantly politicized and based on cheap bargaining.

My delegation reiterates the importance of ensuring that the High Commissioner for Human Rights upholds the mandate entrusted to her by the General Assembly while respecting the integrity and sovereignty of Member States and without politicizing human rights issues as a pretext for interfering in countries' internal affairs. We had hoped that the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights would monitor the grave violations of human rights being committed in Syria by the terrorist organizations Da'esh and the Al-Nusra Front, as well as lifting the unilateral coercive measures being imposed on Syrian women and children and monitoring the brutal Israeli entity's violations against our citizens in the occupied Syrian Golan and Arab Palestine.

On 9 October the so-called Supreme Court of the Israeli occupation authorities issued a ridiculous

judgment approving the 11-year prison sentence that a Galilee court handed down to Sidqi Al-Maqt, who is a symbol of Syrian and Arab prisoners in Israeli jails, a freedom fighter from the town of Majdal Shams in the occupied Syrian Golan, and whom the Israeli occupation forces re-arrested on 25 February 2015 after his previous imprisonment for more than 27 years in Israeli jails with no legal or moral justification.

Lastly, Syria calls on the Secretary-General, the Security Council, the High Commissioner for Human Rights and bodies representing international human rights and international humanitarian law, including the International Committee of the Red Cross, to ensure that the Israeli authorities release Mr. Al-Maqt immediately and unconditionally and ensure the release of all other Syrian citizens in Israeli jails. His unjust sentence is a blatant violation of the rights of Syrians under Israeli occupation and of the principle of justice that is guaranteed by international law everywhere and at all times.

**Mr. García Paz y Miño** (Ecuador) (*spoke in Spanish*): Ecuador would like to thank the President of the General Assembly for convening this high-level meeting to celebrate 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. Twenty years have passed since the adoption of that important Declaration (see A/53/PV.85), which marked a milestone in the United Nations with regard to the activities of those whose main occupation is the defence of human rights. The way this issue has evolved also shows that there are challenges that still require our attention and response, in the hope that the provisions enshrined in the Declaration can be duly put into practice.

In line with its unequivocal promotion of the defence and protection of human rights, Ecuador has made great efforts in recent decades to ensure that its national regulations reflect as fully as possible the provisions of the standards contained in the Declaration, many aspects of which are aligned with the principal human rights conventions that Ecuador has ratified. At the international level, Ecuador's commitment to human rights has been embodied in its ratification of all the relevant fundamental international conventions created through the relevant treaties. In September, Ecuador became only the fifth country in the world to ratify the 18 fundamental instruments of the United

Nations for the protection of human rights. That national commitment has extended from ratifying the conventions to implementing them, by creating public policies and strengthening specific institutions that ensure that human beings are treated as subjects with rights throughout their lives.

Ecuador maintains its commitment to open collaboration with the mechanisms and special procedures of the universal human rights system. We reaffirm our commitment to the promotion and protection of human rights and are currently working to achieve a draft of a legally binding international instrument that uses international human rights law to regulate the activities of transnational corporations and other commercial enterprises, as well as a draft optional protocol, both of which focus on victims of human rights abuses.

Besides being a right in itself, development is also an important condition for promoting, guaranteeing and protecting human rights and helping those who defend them. There can be no guarantees of human rights if we cannot eradicate poverty and overcome inequality. On this occasion of the commemoration of the seventieth anniversary of the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, I would like to quote Eleanor Roosevelt, who said that human rights begin in

“the places where every man, woman and child seeks equal justice, equal opportunity, equal dignity without discrimination. Unless these rights have meaning there, they have little meaning anywhere.”

**Ms. Elmansouri** (Tunisia): Today, as we mark the seventieth anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the twentieth anniversary 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, we must reflect on those landmark instruments as representations of the correlation between achieving peace and development and the enjoyment of human rights and fundamental freedoms.

The Declaration, unanimously adopted 20 years ago (see A/53/PV.85), was designed to place human rights defenders at the heart of the implementation of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and establish minimum international standards for protecting individuals, groups and organizations

striving to achieve all human rights for all. Human rights defenders are unquestionably primary partners of States in protecting human rights and the rule of law, and in achieving sustainable and inclusive development. They work to ensure peace, justice and equality. They are the voice of the voiceless. They disseminate human rights education and help Governments uphold their obligations and hold human rights violators to account. Because their work is crucial to our collective progress, human rights defenders must be able to act freely and without any interference, intimidation, reprisals or undue restriction. We must ramp up our efforts to create a safe and enabling environment for all of them, including by providing them with adequate platforms to work and engage with different stakeholders and by ensuring their unhindered access to communication, including at and with the United Nations.

Tunisia stands today as a living example of the real change that human rights defenders can bring to the world. It was Tunisian citizens who in 2011 called for more justice and greater freedom. Since then, partnership with civil society has been an instrumental part of our policies and programmes for building democracy and achieving inclusive and sustainable development, which in our view is a multi-stakeholder and comprehensive endeavour. Guided by the spirit of our new Constitution, we are determined to continue our efforts to achieve a well-functioning national human rights system and to strengthen a safe and enabling environment for all who are engaged in defending and safeguarding human rights and contributing to peace and sustainable development. We are also fully committed to all United Nations initiatives in that regard, with continued strong support for mandate-holders and for the instruments and resolutions of the Human Rights Council and the General Assembly on human rights defenders, civil-society space, the protection of journalists, freedom of association and assembly and freedom of expression on the Internet.

Today is an occasion on which to express our recognition and appreciation of the contributions of human rights defenders and civil-society actors to achieving peace and building consensus. They often do so within a shrinking civil-society space and in the face of great threats, adversity and reprisals. It is regrettable that 20 years after the unanimous adoption of the Declaration, human rights defenders are still subjected to attacks and violence, many of them directed against women and many of them fatal. Today we should listen



to their voices, while keeping in mind that, as the late Kofi Annan so eloquently said,

“when the rights of human rights defenders are violated, all our rights are put in jeopardy and all of us are made less safe.”

**Ms. Byrne Nason** (Ireland): Ireland aligns itself with the statement delivered on behalf of the European Union, and we are delighted to join the celebration today of the twentieth anniversary 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.

Ireland salutes the courageous human rights defenders across the globe, not just today but every day. We like to think that we have played a substantial role in promoting and protecting those who face persecution for defending the rights of others — human rights defenders. Ireland’s commitment to this issue is at the heart of our foreign policy and it has been firmly rooted there since the establishment of our State almost 100 years ago. It is a part of who and what we are. We work hard here at the United Nations to create, protect and maintain a safe and enabling environment for civil society, and that is inextricably linked to our long-established priority of supporting human rights defenders.

Human rights defenders play an essential role in the promotion and protection of human rights. I believe it is our shared tragedy that in recent years human rights defenders have faced increasing pressure in scores of countries from both State and non-State actors. They are subject to harassment, intimidation, arbitrary arrest and violent attacks. Their capacity to promote human rights has been limited by new restrictions on civil-society organizations and the press. Often, their immediate circle, including families, friends and colleagues, also faces persecution. That is quite simply unacceptable. We are deeply proud to see Front Line Defenders, an organization founded by an Irishwoman, with its headquarters in Dublin, recognized today by the United Nations. As one of the four winners of the United Nations Prize in the Field of Human Rights for 2018, awarded this morning, they deserve to have a light shone on their work.

As Chair of the Commission on the Status of Women, I was particularly pleased to note that at the ceremony this morning the Secretary-General stood beside six women — the four prizewinners, you,

Madam President, and Michelle Bachelet, the High Commissioner for Human Rights. Women play an important role in the defence of human rights globally. Ireland’s Front Line Defenders works to promote human rights defenders in the most dangerous and challenging parts of the globe. We believe that today’s award recognizes the vital work not just of Front Line Defenders, but of all those who struggle every hour of every day to protect the human rights defenders who are at risk across their communities. These people inspire us and I believe they reflect our better selves.

Last week, on Human Rights Day, the seventieth anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Simon Coveney, Ireland’s Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade, announced plans for a memorial to human rights defenders, which will be developed by the Foreign Ministry and Front Line Defenders. The memorial will be situated in the garden of Ireland’s Foreign Ministry, right in the heart of Dublin, and will commemorate the estimated 3,500 human rights defenders who have been killed since 1998 simply because they stood up in defence of the rights of others. The fact that such a memorial is even necessary is a poignant reminder of the often dangerous conditions in which human rights defenders work and the worrying global trend of the increasing threats, harassment and attacks against them. As States, we have a moral and political obligation to counter that and to continue to provide an enabling environment in which human rights defenders can operate free from threats and free from insecurity. We believe that is the least we can do.

**Ms. Agladze** (Georgia): We are pleased to join today’s celebration of 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. We strongly believe that human rights defenders play a vital role in democratic societies. The active engagement of individuals, groups and organizations is essential to continued progress towards the fulfilment of international human rights.

Georgia is committed to ensuring an accessible environment in which civil-society organizations can freely operate and promote the protection of human rights in our country. Along with the legislation providing all of the necessary guarantees for civil-society organizations, we have also ensured that the relevant practical process is in place. In that context,

I would like to highlight the example of civil-society organizations' participation in the decision-making process. A large number of civil-society organizations and independent experts were actively involved in the development of our national human rights strategy and the corresponding national governmental action plan on human rights. The engagement of civil-society organizations is ensured in all phases of the policymaking process, from development to monitoring and evaluation.

We underline the importance of strengthening the role of non-governmental organizations and safeguarding the space for civil society in order to ensure that their voices are heard. I also want to stress the important role of national human rights institutions in the promotion and protection of human rights. The national human rights institution of Georgia, the Public Defender's Office, is a constitutional institution that supervises the protection of human rights and freedoms in Georgia, identifies human rights violations and contributes to the restoration of violated rights and freedoms.

Regrettably, human rights defenders continue to face many challenges and are often subject to reprisals. Georgia joins the call of the international community for an immediate end to such reprisals. There is an urgent need for all States to take the measures needed to prevent intimidation and reprisals against human rights defenders and to provide appropriate remedies for all such acts. That challenge is particularly acute in areas where sovereign States are deprived of the opportunity to exercise effective control, such as the Russian-occupied Abkhazia and Tskhinvali regions of Georgia, where human rights defenders are persecuted and silenced for their criticism. The case of the civil activist Tamar Mearakishvili is the latest alarming example in that regard.

Finally, I once again affirm Georgia's commitment to ensuring the full and equal enjoyment of all fundamental rights and freedoms and stress the importance of the promotion and protection of human rights defenders.

**Mr. Perera** (Sri Lanka): Sri Lanka, as a sponsor of resolution 72/247, entitled "Twentieth anniversary and promotion 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", is pleased

that this important meeting is being convened this year, as we celebrate the seventieth anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. We would like to express our sincere appreciation to the President and to Norway, the principal sponsor of the resolution, and to other key sponsors for this initiative.

Promoting and protecting human rights is a constant work in progress. There is no nation that has no challenges and no nation that is perfect. The protection of human rights is not something that can be achieved overnight even with the sincerest of commitments and the most fervent determination. But despite the challenges, it is our firm duty and responsibility to strive to promote, protect and uphold the human rights of all. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action and 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 constitute a fundamental framework and a guide to action in our collective efforts to meet the varying challenges that have arisen in modern times, including racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance.

Human rights defenders are vital partners in our collective efforts to give expression to our human rights obligations. Sri Lanka follows a policy of constructive engagement and dialogue in its efforts to advance human rights and fundamental freedoms. I should mention in particular our constant and close cooperation with the human rights mechanisms and treaty bodies of the United Nations, including the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner on Human Rights. During the past three years, eight special procedures, including two Working Groups, have undertaken visits to Sri Lanka at our invitation. During their visits, Sri Lanka provided unrestricted access and cooperated in every way, enabling the special procedures mandate holders to fulfil their respective mandates throughout their visits. In our interactions with United Nations treaty bodies, we have taken an open and inclusive bottom-up approach, consisting of consultations and collaboration with stakeholders not only within the Government but also with civil-society organizations, human rights defenders and the National Human Rights Commission of Sri Lanka.

Sri Lanka has strengthened the independence of its Human Rights Commission following our enactment of a nineteenth amendment to our Constitution. Sri Lanka

is pleased that in May of this year the Commission was reaccredited with A status by the Global Alliance of National Human Rights Institutions, as per the Paris Principles. Since 2015 Sri Lanka has taken far-reaching measures to strengthen the role of Parliament, re-establish independent commissions, ensure an independent judiciary and strengthen civil society. As a nation dedicated to democracy and the rule of the law, today we are reaping the benefits of these tangible measures as our national institutions have demonstrated a deep sense of integrity and resilience in the face of unprecedented challenges.

Without the rule of law working in tandem with an independent judiciary, there can be no advancement of peace, development or human rights. In the past few years Sri Lanka has rebuilt its independent institutions, instilling a sense of confidence in its people that in the final analysis their human rights and fundamental freedoms will be protected by independent national institutions that will uphold the rule of law. Empowering our national institutions by securing a sense of independence and integrity is the ultimate guarantee in safeguarding the rights and responsibilities of individuals and groups and the enjoyment of universally recognized human rights and fundamental freedoms. The crucial role of civil society, including human rights defenders, in the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms in the face of our current challenges cannot be overstated.

As we celebrate the seventieth anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the twentieth anniversary of the United Nations Declaration on human rights defenders, it is an opportune time for us to reflect on what we have achieved over the years, both nationally and internationally, and to take action to strengthen the institutions that will help us to overcome our challenges and achieve the objective of promoting and protecting universally recognized human rights and fundamental freedoms for all. That is the best tribute we can pay human rights defenders, many of whom have made the supreme sacrifice in the cause of the protection of human rights.

**Mr. Davidson** (South Africa): South Africa is honoured to be a part of this occasion of the twentieth anniversary of the 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, commonly referred to as the Declaration on human rights

defenders. This occasion, together with the seventieth anniversary of the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights, coincides with the centenaries of Nelson Mandela and Albertina Sisulu. Those two South African icons championed human rights both at home on the African continent and globally — our very own human rights defenders, who had a fundamental belief in the primacy of equality, freedom and human dignity, based on the cardinal principle of non-discrimination. They also strongly advocated for democracy, human rights and the rule of law.

South Africa values the contributions and sacrifices made by individuals, groups, civil-society organizations and other key relevant actors in helping to liberate our country. It is with that in mind that we are here today to celebrate the anniversary of this Declaration and what it embodies. The core principles and values underpinning the South African Constitution are premised on the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights and reflect our commitment to that Declaration and the Declaration on human rights defenders. The seventieth anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights remains significant for our country, and on 7 December 2018, South Africa hosted the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights at the landmark site for our constitutional democracy, Constitutional Hill, to celebrate the special occasion, which also marked the centenaries of our two icons and the twentieth anniversary of the South African Constitution. On that occasion South Africa's President recommitted our country to the values and principle of human rights and fundamental freedoms.

South Africa prides itself on its efforts to work continually to build a world free of oppression and discrimination, where all can live in equality and dignity, free from fear and want. This Declaration is underpinned by a set of rights and responsibilities that must be respected by all, including States and non-State actors, who have a duty and responsibility to support and protect human rights defenders active in all areas. Today we are too often witnessing the rise of threats, criminalization and targeting of human rights defenders, including those defending their ancestral lands. These actors play an important role in ensuring the practical enjoyment of human rights, including the right to development. In that regard, South Africa continues to call for transnational corporations and other business enterprises to be held accountable for human rights violations in areas where they conduct their business

activities. Without people willing to promote and protect human rights and fundamental freedoms and to hold perpetrators accountable for their violations and abuses, we will fail those who are most vulnerable and marginalized. It is important to acknowledge that we all have a role to fulfil as human rights defenders in ensuring that human rights and fundamental freedoms are realized and enjoyed by all and without distinction.

In conclusion, on this day in 1998 the General Assembly adopted the Declaration by consensus. It therefore represents a commitment by all Member States to its effective implementation, nationally and internationally. South Africa firmly believes that this anniversary offers us an opportunity to assess how the commitments enshrined in the Declaration have guided and continue to guide us as we face ever-changing global landscapes and challenges. Human rights and fundamental freedoms remain indivisible, interconnected and interrelated, and must be promoted and protected for all to enjoy without prejudice. It is therefore incumbent on us, as State and non-State actors, to make this effectively realizable.

**Mr. Iglesias Mori** (Chile) (*spoke in Spanish*): It is an honour for Chile to participate in this commemoration 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, adopted 20 years ago. We especially welcome the presence of Ms. Michelle Bachelet, High Commissioner for Human Rights and former President of Chile, as well as the Minister for Foreign Affairs of Norway, the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders and, above all, the representatives of civil society, the human rights defenders whom we are celebrating today.

In the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the international community created a historic text that guides and models the work of societies, achieving a civilizational synthesis. Throughout the past 70 years, the mechanisms to promote and protect human rights have increased and improved. Unfortunately, however, serious and massive violations of human rights have proliferated to the same degree in various parts of the world, especially in the form of threats to the work of those who dedicate their lives to the defence and promotion of human rights. Today, 20 years after the Declaration on Human Rights Defenders, we must reaffirm its legitimacy and necessity, as well as foster

the concept of the defence of human rights as a right in itself.

As a member of the Human Rights Council, Chile affirms the essential contribution of human rights defenders to the work of the Council's mechanisms and treaty bodies. Because of that contribution, and in the face of worrying global trends against human rights, its defenders are the first targets, often subject to violence, threats and reprisals and sometimes to arbitrary detention or extrajudicial execution. The noble work of defending the rights of others is a high point for humanity that we as an international community should celebrate and protect.

The United Nations system has progressed, bit by bit. It has created a mandate for the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders and established a United Nations focal point on reprisals against human rights defenders, a post now held by Mr. Andrew Gilmour, Assistant Secretary-General for Human Rights. We will support his work energetically and with confidence. We applaud those initiatives, but without the will of States, they cannot ensure protection.

In conclusion, we hope that this commemoration of the twentieth anniversary of the Declaration on human rights defenders will be an opportunity to reaffirm the international commitment to protecting human rights defenders and ensuring an environment that enables them to pursue their activities freely and without interference, intimidation, threats, reprisals or undue restrictions. I once again affirm that any argument that undermines respect for human rights, its defenders and its civil-society organizations is invalid.

**Mr. Heusgen** (Germany): Human rights defenders are among the most courageous in our societies. They stand up to injustice, ask for change and help people in need. Human rights defenders face serious threats all over the world. Their space has been shrinking in the past decade. They are increasingly confronted by violence or threats of violence and intimidation, as well as repressive laws designed to undermine their work. We are appalled by the acts of violence and the suppression perpetrated against journalists, lawyers, online activists, indigenous or ethnic minorities such as the Uyghurs, LGBTI activists and those who advocate for freedom of conscience or fight for women's rights.

In Syria, the White Helmets are under attack as they risk their lives and save others by evacuating civilians from dangerous areas, and by rescuing women

and children after severe bombings. In Myanmar, Reuters journalists Wa Lone and Kyaw Soe Oo are still in prison for their work in investigating the killing of 10 Rohingya Muslim men and boys by security forces. In many other countries all over the world, LGBTI activists are fighting for equal rights and against the daily discrimination they face. We recently had an opportunity to meet some of them at the German Mission during the LGBTI advocacy week. Worldwide, female human rights defenders face gender-specific risks. Not only are they threatened for their work as human rights defenders, they also face sexual and gender-based violence and are often marginalized. We should therefore focus particularly on protecting and empowering women human rights defenders and ending impunity for crimes committed against women and all human rights defenders.

Germany is also disturbed by the growing trend limiting the access of civil-society organizations to the United Nations. The participation of such organizations in the United Nations is vital to its functioning. Limiting their access deprives all of us of the important contributions of human rights defenders and civil society. Germany, as an elected member of the Security Council for the 2019-2020 term, remains fully committed to working with human rights defenders and civil-society organizations. We will continue to support efforts to create and maintain a safe and enabling space for civil society and human rights defenders in the United Nations, including in the Security Council. The partnership with civil society is crucial to the protection of human rights.

**Mr. Allansson** (Iceland): I would first like to thank you, Madam President, as well as Argentina, Italy and Norway, for organizing this important event.

As we commemorate the twentieth anniversary 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, adopted by all States Members of the United Nations, we welcome this opportunity to reflect on our achievements and on the challenges that remain.

Iceland continues to support and advocate the protection of civil society and human rights defenders. Their ability to work safely without fear of retaliation is a key element in maintaining open and democratic societies. We have therefore made the protection of

human rights defenders one of the priorities of our current membership in the Human Rights Council in Geneva. It remains the responsibility of every State to provide a safe environment for civil society and human rights defenders, including by protecting the rule of law, due process and freedom of speech. Making space for alternative views and criticism is a source of strength for all States that helps to fuel political and social development.

Unfortunately, the reality on the ground is extremely worrying, as human rights defenders are increasingly subject to threats, extrajudicial killings, arbitrary detentions and other severe human rights violations. I would particularly like to draw the Assembly's attention to human rights defenders who promote and protect fundamental freedoms as they relate to the enjoyment of a safe, healthy and sustainable environment. Empowering environmental human rights defenders is crucial to the protection of the environment and all other related rights. If the international community is to translate the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development into reality, we must address State and non-State actors' increasing and often violent harassment and demonization of environmental human rights defenders.

States should support everyone's right to promoting healthy and sustainable development, the very foundation for the enjoyment of a vast range of human rights. The current situation of environmental human rights defenders must be addressed, and individuals and groups on the front lines in the defence of sustainable development should be protected. I want to assure the Assembly that Iceland will continue to promote and protect the rights of all human rights defenders, who play a pivotal role in safeguarding international human rights for the benefit of all.

**Mr. Duarte Lopes** (Portugal): Portugal welcomes the Secretary-General's report (A/73/230) on the twentieth anniversary 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, and endorses his assessment of the work being done by the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders, as well as by the High Commissioner for Human Rights and her Office and by other United Nations bodies.

The Declaration reaffirms fundamental rights and freedoms such as freedom of association, peaceful

assembly, opinion and expression, as well as the right to access information and justice, freedoms that are all enshrined in the Portuguese Constitution. Through its vote and sponsorship within the Human Rights Council and the Third Committee, Portugal has expressed its support for resolutions protecting human rights defenders. By way of example, as a member of the Human Rights Council until 2017, Portugal sponsored resolution 31/32, on the protection of human rights defenders. We were also among the initial sponsors of resolution 32/31, on the civil-society space, and of the subsequent resolution on civil-society space, resolution 38/12, entitled “Civil society space: engagement with international and regional organizations”.

My country believes that human rights defenders are key actors in any democratic system and play a fundamental role in achieving peace and sustainable development at all levels — local, national, regional and international — as they ensure the monitoring of economic, social and cultural rights and identify

violations and abuses. Human rights defenders should be supported and should not fear consequences such as intimidation or reprisals for their actions, including the simple act of cooperating with the United Nations. That is why Portugal supports the Guidelines against Intimidation or Reprisals adopted in San José (HRI/MC/2015/6), and condemns any practice that seeks to discourage human rights defenders from pursuing their activities.

In conclusion, I want to share our firm belief that education is a fundamental tool for raising awareness about the promotion and protection of human rights. In that connection, the study of human rights is mandatory for all Portuguese students.

**The President** (*spoke in Spanish*): The General Assembly has thus concluded this stage of its consideration of sub-item (b) of agenda item 74.

*The meeting rose at 6.05 p.m.*