



# General Assembly

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## Human Rights Council

### Forty-third session

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Agenda item 5

### Human rights bodies and mechanisms

## Written statement\* submitted by Society for Threatened Peoples, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[03 February 2020]

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\* Issued as received, in the language(s) of submission only.

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## **Reprisals against Human Rights activists collaborating with UN mechanisms**

### **Harassment tactics**

Despite increasing awareness of the issue, human rights activists still face considerable risk when engaging in advocacy within UN institutions. They are subject to blocking tactics, intimidation and retaliation by state and non-state actors, even on UN premises. These forms of harassment aim at silencing activists and preventing them from partaking in human rights mechanisms.

Multiple instances of physical violence, confiscation of documents and travel bans hinder activists from leaving their states when attending UN conferences and meetings. By labeling activists as separatists or terrorists, states discredit their contributions, depict them as security threats, and restrict access to UN institutions. Activists report bullying and harassment by state's representatives and members of government-organized non-governmental organisations (GONGOs) on UN premises, intimidating phone calls, and being photographed or filmed without consent. After the advocacy, activists and their family members are subject to acts of repercussion, including vilification through hate speech, state surveillance, arbitrary detention and torture.

### **Cases of reprisals in 2019**

The annual Reprisals Report for 2019 cites cases of reprisals from 47 countries, including 15 current members of the Human Rights Council. These cases hint at the systematic nature of retaliation against human rights activists. It should be kept in mind that this is just a fraction of the phenomenon. Many cases of reprisals were not reported, either because of underreporting or out of security concerns for the victims.

The practice of issuing travel bans to prevent human rights advocates from attending UN meetings and conferences persists, as the cases in Cuba, Bahrain, Egypt, and Viet Nam – among others – demonstrate. The use of videotaping and photographing as an intimidation tactic was successful at least once, when Bangladeshi indigenous peoples' representatives refrained from speaking at the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues in New York in April 2019.

An emerging trend is the heightened use of hate speech and cyberbullying to intimidate activists, especially the ones fighting for LGBTI rights. Rape and death threats, threats against family members, insults and harassing text messages against activists are reported in numerous countries, including Brazil, Iran, Cuba, the United States of America, and Cameroon, sometimes forcing the activists to relocate. The allegation of terrorism, of cooperating with foreign organizations and being a security threat is supposed to discredit activists and employ counter-terrorism mechanisms to hinder their advocacy, as happened in the cases of the Philippines and Egypt.

State surveillance, monitoring, deprivation of personal liberties, and arbitrary detention are retaliation tactics employed in states such as China, Egypt, the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, Mexico and Saudi Arabia, among others. Physical assault, detention in inhumane conditions, the denial of visits from family members, medical neglect, torture and rape have been documented in different cases. The denial of a fair legal process and arbitrary legal procedures also belong to the array of reprisal tactics.

### **Effects on advocacy and weakness of current framework**

Worrying trends can be identified regarding the effects of reprisals on advocacy. Since engaging with UN mechanisms is unsafe for many human rights activists, many refrain from testifying human rights abuse. There is evidence for growing self-censorship in civil society across different domains. For many activists, it also proves to be too dangerous to return to

their country of origin. For this reason, many relocate abroad, meaning that they cannot testify human rights abuse as eyewitnesses anymore.

Even though the Reprisals Report can have a deterrent effect, the mechanisms to ensure accountability and address harassment and retaliation remain weak. Follow-up support is lacking, especially after advocates have moved back to the country of origin. In general, activists are not aware of the services available in case of reprisal and intimidation, nor they know to whom they should report an incident. Given the crucial role of human rights advocates in UN institutions, it is essential to strengthen mechanisms to protect activists and ensure they can contribute without risk.

## **Recommendations**

Society for Threatened Peoples calls on the Human Rights Council to:

- Help creating safe spaces for activists in order for them to be able to testify on human rights abuses without fear repercussions.
  - Expel harassing individuals from the UN premises.
  - Publicly denounce any instance of reprisal and promote accountability.
  - Inform activists of the reporting mechanisms and offer them follow-up support.
  - Train staff to recognize and respond to incidents of harassment and intimidation.
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