

## Panel Discussion: Human Rights Defenders and Freedom of Association



(left to right) **Andrew Hudson**, Manager Human Rights Defenders Program, Human Rights First; **Margaret Sekaggya**, UN Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights Defenders; **Andressa Caldas**; Executive Director, Global Justice, Brazil; **Ambassador Mona Juul**; Deputy-Permanent Representative of Norway to the United Nations; **Mary Akrami**; Executive Director, Afghan Women's Skills Development Center; **Gabriel Gonzalez**; Colombian Political Prisoners Solidarity Committee

### OVERVIEW

On October 23, 2009, Human Rights First, the International Service for Human Rights and the Norwegian Mission to the United Nations co-sponsored a public panel discussion on Human Rights Defenders and Freedom of Association. The event coincided with the annual report to the General Assembly of the Special Rapporteur on Human Rights Defenders. A summary of the presentations is below:

### PANEL DISCUSSION

1. **Margaret Sekaggya**, UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights Defenders, provided a preview of her annual report, which was presented to the UN General Assembly immediately after the panel discussion. Sekaggya's report and presentation focused on freedom of association and the deterioration in respect for this right over the last five years, in particular through the adoption of restrictive NGO laws which sometimes aim to

eliminate the work of human rights defenders. The Special Rapporteur emphasized that registration of NGOs should not be compulsory and that criminalization of participation in unregistered NGOs violates the right to freedom of association. She found that states use the following tactics to hamper the activities of human rights associations: exceedingly lengthy registration processes; burdensome documentation requirements; overly vague legislation and layers of bureaucracy. According to the Rapporteur, many states have also introduced impermissible laws to restrict or prohibit the ability of NGOs to receive funding, especially foreign funding.

While Ms. Sekaggya made the decision not to name any UN member states in her report, the remaining presenters provided specific examples about obstacles human rights defenders face in Afghanistan, Colombia, and Brazil.

2. **Mary Akrami, Executive Director of the Afghan Women's Skills Development Center**, focused on the problems that women human rights defenders experience while challenging traditional gender roles and ingrained cultural attitudes in patriarchal societies. Akrami's own work in advocacy and litigation expose the vulnerability of women in Afghanistan, which only underscores the need for women to take further action to defend their rights.
3. **Andressa Caldas**, Executive Director, Global Justice in Brazil works to promote human rights in Brazil, with a particular focus on how economic development affects the country's most impoverished and on police brutality. Global Justice has pioneered the approach of protecting human rights defenders in Brazil, documenting numerous cases of serious human rights violations committed against activists by state forces and was instrumental in the adoption of a state policy to protect human rights defenders.
4. While Global Justice often collaborates with state authorities, **Gabriel Gonzalez from the Colombian Political Prisoners Solidarity Committee** knows first-hand how human rights defenders are stigmatized, harassed, and falsely imprisoned. Drawing on the Rapporteur's comments that public officials frequently subject human rights defenders and NGOs to baseless criminal charges for slander, defamation or other similarly vague offences, he told of his 15 months of unjust detention on specious terrorism charges. His presentation provided resounding support for the Rapporteur's recommendation that States should not criminalize activities in defense of human rights.

The side event was well attended by over 100 people and informed the General Assembly's negotiation of the 2009 resolution on human rights defenders. On October 22, 2009, Gonzalez and Caldas' colleague Sandra Carvalho [received](#) Human Rights First's annual award in recognition of their courageous defense of human rights in Colombia and Brazil.