

**Panel Discussion: The UN Human Rights Defenders Declaration
after Ten years: Protecting Rights in a Changing World**



OVERVIEW

On October 24, 2008, Human Rights First, the International Service for Human Rights, and the Norwegian Mission to the UN hosted a panel discussion to celebrate the 10th anniversary of the UN Human Rights Defenders Declaration and to discuss the current challenges faced by human rights defenders globally.

The panel discussion focused mainly on the impact of the Declaration and how it has been implemented in practice in the past ten years. A summary of the panelists' presentations is below.

PANEL DISCUSSION

1. Andrew Hudson, Human Rights First, Moderator

Mr. Hudson opened the discussion by hailing the groundbreaking nature of the Human Rights Defenders Declaration agreed to by all UN member states. It encompasses rights already codified in other instruments, such as the right to freedom of expression, but also rights not enshrined in other documents, such as the right for defenders to receive funding and the right to promote human rights. He suggested that the 10th anniversary of the Declaration is an occasion to highlight best practices in relation to implementation of the Declaration but also note where the Declaration has failed adequately to be put into practice. Finally he noted that the unique and effective UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights Defenders had originated from the Declaration and enjoys cross-regional support as evidenced by its renewal at the Human Rights Council in March 2008.

2. Ambassador Morten Wetland, Permanent Representative of Norway to the United Nations

“The importance of the declaration is the protection it lends to human rights defenders who do not have the protection of a celebrity name.”

Ambassador Morten Wetland by emphasizing the importance of human rights defenders being able to freely express their ideas and the role the Declaration plays in enabling such expression. He noted that the Declaration has increased societal awareness of human rights defenders but that there is still more work to be done given the many violations suffered by defenders around the world. He concluded that it is vital for the international community to continue to find ways to protect those who fight for the human rights of others.

3. Ms. Margaret Sekaggya, Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights Defenders

“The protection of human rights is a responsibility of each and every one of us, not just the responsibility of one organization. It’s a challenge and we have to change people’s views—to make people realize that their fight is important and that they shall continue. We can make a difference if we work together. We must work together.”

Ms. Margaret Sekaggya began by emphasizing the significance of the Declaration. She expressed concern, however, that ten years after the proclamation of the Declaration, freedom of assembly is still denied to human rights defenders all over the world. “From Swaziland to Brussels, Central Asia or the Balkans the stories are all similar.”

She underlined the importance of states responding to communications from her office regarding allegations of human rights violations against defenders. She stated that these communications are among the most effective and attainable ways of improving the situation of human rights defenders by pressuring government authorities to provide protection.

She also outlined her vision for the mandate and prioritized the following issues: protecting vulnerable groups of defenders; developing early warning mechanisms; collaborating with relevant stakeholders, disseminating the Declaration, incorporating defender concerns into the Human Rights Council's Universal Periodic Review and sharing best practices.



Panelists

4. Mr. Oscar Pedraza, co-founder, *Sons and Daughters for Memory and Against Impunity*, Colombia

“The Declaration does not place human rights defenders outside of the social sphere. It demands respect and stands for their position. However, sometimes we may say that we are still waiting for [a Superhero] to come save us.”

Mr. Oscar Pedraza argued that human rights are still being violated in drastic ways in Colombia. Indigenous communities and human rights defenders are routinely targeted and their lives are endangered. For these reasons, he asserted that the Declaration is necessary to safeguard the lives of these people.

He stated that human rights defenders in Colombia are accused by public officials of being involved in terrorism or characterized as being unpatriotic. He stressed the importance of grassroots movements in efforts to improve the situation on human rights. Pedraza called for

better protection of human rights defenders by consolidating and strengthening democratic societies.

Pedraza began his speech by sharing the story of the *Chapulín Colorado*, a television superhero who saves little children when they are in trouble. In reference to the current situation of human rights defenders in Colombia, people are still hopeful that the *Chapulín* will come to save them and instill power and confidence in defenders.

5. Ms. Nora Younis, New media activist, Egypt, Recipient of Human Rights First's 2008 Human Rights Award

“You feel like you are fighting against a ghost regime and cannot prove yourself [innocent]. We hope that the declaration will develop a way to deal with the new [hidden] methods of attacking defenders.”

Ms. Nora Younis identified new and growing trends of human rights violations that are surfacing in many parts of the world, including Egypt. She shared her knowledge about the new trend of indirect threats against human rights defenders. Such threats obliquely threaten harming human rights defenders in order to protect the identity of the perpetrator. Younis dubbed them the “ghost regime” and she hoped that in the near future, the Declaration will develop a way to beat the “ghosts” at their own game. Younis called for further action to empower civil society.