**Highlights from the 54th session of the Human Rights Council**

From Monday, September 11, to Friday 13, 2023, the Human Rights Council held its last session of the year. From the rights of indigenous peoples to reprisals against human rights defenders, the issues addressed affect Right Livelihood Laureates in different ways. Below are the highlights of our engagement and general considerations about the session.

At the onset, Mr. Volker Türk, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, delivered his global update on the situation of human rights. He deplored the current state of affairs, where politics of division and distraction prevail. He also expressed alarm over the increase in military coups, authoritarianism and crushing of dissent. He reminded States of the political neutrality of human rights, and that they all have a responsibility to realise them. Turning to economic, social and cultural rights, he expressed concern at the growing inequalities in the world. He brought attention to the situation in Ukraine, where attacks on grain facilities have impacted people's right to food worldwide, including in Somalia. He also highlighted the need to ensure accountability for businesses that plunder the environment and welcomed the proposal to include the international crime of ecocide within the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court. He also welcomed the discussions by Brazil, Bolivia, Colombia, Ecuador, Guyana, Peru, Suriname and Venezuela towards a common vision for the Amazon rainforest, including effective participation by indigenous peoples. He expressed concern about the human rights situation in India, the Occupied Palestinian Territory, the Russian Federation, Iran and Cameroon, among others.

Introducing the general debate on the High Commissioner’s oral update, the Group of Human Rights Experts on Nicaragua updated the Council on the country’s human rights situation. They reported continued pressure for human rights defenders and opponents to leave Nicaragua, through extreme forms of reprisals and expressed alarm over the intensification of the repression of peaceful dissent. Right Livelihood, CEJIL and the Red de Defensoras Indígenas took the opportunity to highlight the situation of indigenous peoples in the Caribbean Coast of Nicaragua, who continue to suffer illegal attacks by settlers, resulting in widespread violence, kidnappings and killings. We called on the Council to ensure that the Group of Experts has the necessary resources to carry out its mandate, especially in light of the recent inclusion of indigenous peoples among their priority areas. The same situation was also addressed on two more occasions during the session. At the interactive dialogue with the Expert Mechanism on indigenous peoples, we drew particular attention to the militarisation of indigenous territories and the cohabitation with settlers promoted by the Nicaraguan Government, calling on the Council to urge Nicaragua to guarantee the rights of indigenous peoples, to immediately remove armed settlers from demarcated lands and to carry out independent investigations into all violations. At the interactive dialogue with the Special Rapporteur on the rights of Indigenous peoples, whose report focused on the impact of green financing on the lives of Indigenous peoples, we drew attention to the case of the Green Climate Fund's BioClima project which would cause irreversible damages to indigenous peoples’ land and resources in Nicaragua. We,
therefore, reiterated our calls above and additionally called on the Council to urge Nicaragua to take proactive measures to terminate this project.

During the first week, the Council also held its annual interactive dialogue with the Special Rapporteur on truth, justice and reparations, whose report focused on the legal standards underpinning the principles of transitional justice. Right Livelihood took the opportunity to raise the case of Guatemala, where the previous administration focused on dismantling democratic institutions and criminalising those investigating key cases for transitional justice. We expressed concern about the obstacles to the transition of power following the election of opposition leader Bernardo Arévalo and called the Council to ensure continued scrutiny.

The issue of reprisals against human rights defenders and those collaborating with the UN was high on the agenda. During the interactive dialogue on the matter, some States expressed concern at the situation of 2020 Right Livelihood Laureate Ales Bialiatski, arbitrarily detained in Belarus since July 2021. We also highlighted the situation of Human Rights Center “Viasna”, and deplored its recent designation by the authorities as an “extremist formation,” which is facilitating further prosecution. In our statement, we also raise attention to the reprisals in Saudi Arabia, where 2018 Right Livelihood Laureate Mohammed al-Qahtani remains forcibly disappeared, and to the continued reprisals against activists in Western Sahara, where 2019 Right Livelihood Laureate Aminatou Haidar was targeted with Pegasus in 2021.

We expanded on these cases of reprisals on other occasions. Regarding Belarus, the Council held an interactive dialogue on the matter with the OHCHR, where they deplored the continued repression. The EU openly condemned the designation of Viasna as an extremist formation and urged Belarus to release all political prisoners. Right Livelihood speaking jointly with Human Rights Center “Viasna”, issued a similar call but asked the Council to consider establishing a stronger, fully independent, investigative mechanism to ensure accountability.

The case of Mohammed al-Qahtani was at the core of our joint statement with ALQST and MENA Rights Group during the interactive dialogue with the Working Group on enforced disappearances. Overall, we continue to regret the lack of attention given by the Council to the situation of human rights in Saudi Arabia, where anyone expressing dissent is subjected to extremely lengthy sentences and torture. Silence only legitimises the authorities’ tactics of repression.

Another issue that lacks proper attention from the Council is the situation in Western Sahara, which was not mentioned in the global update of the High Commissioner. We deplored the continuing violations in the occupied territory during the general debate on situations requiring the Council’s attention (item 4). The approval of the Moroccan plan by an increasing number of States vis-à-vis Western Sahara remains concerning. We urged the Council not to be complicit with the oppressor and openly denounce the human rights violations committed by the Kingdom of Morocco.
On the other hand, the human rights in the Russian Federation remained high on the Council’s agenda. Ms. Mariana Katzarova, Special Rapporteur on the issue presented her first report, highlighting the increase in politically motivated persecution, including in the case of Oleg Orlov, co-chair of 2004 Right Livelihood Laureate Memorial International. Numerous States continued to express grave concern over the situation inside the country, especially since the beginning of the war against Ukraine. On this issue, Right Livelihood also co-sponsored a side event, organised by the International Federation of Human Rights Leagues (FIDH), where speakers denounced grave violations of the right to truth.

Among the five panel discussions that the Council held during the session was the biannual discussion on youth and human rights, focusing on young people’s engagement with climate change and global environmental decision-making processes. States recognised the importance of young people as agents of change for climate actions. The European Union, among others, deplored that severe restrictions persist for their participation in decision-making processes. We note that these restrictions include reprisals against climate activists, which are widespread in numerous countries. Under the General Debate on the promotion and protection of all human rights (item 3), we highlighted the case of Uganda, where activists protesting against the EACOP project, including members of 2022 Right Livelihood Laureate AFIEGO, are arbitrarily arrested, detained and put on police bond.

The last week of the Council took place in the aftermath of the resumption of hostilities between Israel and Hamas. Room 20 felt as polarised as ever. On October 9, the Council held a minute of silence led by the United States, for the victims of the October 7 attack by Hamas. On October 10, another minute of silence was held, led this time by Pakistan, for all Palestinians who died in the Israeli retaliatory attacks, highlighting that the ongoing violence is the consequence of decades of illegal foreign occupation. In their closing statements to the session, on October 13, multiple States referred to the situation, some underlining the right of Israel to defend itself from acts of hostility through a strong and just response, others urging the international community to respect common values, including the principles of international humanitarian law and ensure that humanitarian aid could reach Gaza.

Despite the tense geopolitical climate, the Council concluded the session with the adoption of 36 resolutions, among which 27 were adopted by consensus. The Council established two new mechanisms: a fact-finding mission on Sudan and a Working Group on the rights of peasants and other people in rural areas. The two will play important roles in ensuring accountability in Sudan and implementing the UN Declaration on the Rights of Peasants respectively. The Council also extended the mandates of the 14 special procedures, including the Special Rapporteur on the Russian Federation, the Special Rapporteur on Afghanistan, the Special Rapporteur on Cambodia and the working group on arbitrary detention and enforced disappearances. It is fundamental that all such mandates are equipped with the necessary resources to fulfil their mandates. Lastly, we were pleased to see the adoption of the biennial resolution on reprisals. We nonetheless regret that numerous inputs from civil society were not taken into consideration and that the resolution lacks effective operationality regarding the role
of the UN in addressing reprisals, which are, as shown by multiple cases of Right Livelihood Laureates, increasing in breadth and severity.