

Highlights from the 57th session of the Human Rights Council

From September 9 to October 11, the Human Rights Council held its 57th session in Geneva. Under the shadow of increasing conflicts and disregard for human rights, the Council addressed key issues surrounding civil and political rights of relevance to Right Livelihood Laureates, including arbitrary detention, enforced disappearances and reprisals towards civil society as well as economic, social and cultural rights, including the right to water and sanitation. A number of relevant country situations, including that of Cambodia and Belarus, were also debated. This time, Right Livelihood's engagement focused extensively on Laureates behind bars. Below are the highlights of our engagement and general considerations about the session.

As per tradition, the session began with the High Commissioner for Human Rights' [global update](#). He stated that human rights are not in crisis; rather, it is political leaders who should make them a reality that are turning away from key issues, such as gender equality. Mr. Turk emphasised the positive contribution that human rights have in society, and how they help achieve greater justice and stability. As 2024 is considered a "mega-election year", he urged all voters worldwide to think which candidates will work for human rights and equality. In this context, he condemned the scapegoating of minority groups such as migrants during electoral periods, including in Germany and France and was appalled by the constant efforts to disrupt freedom of expression, assembly and association worldwide, including in Azerbaijan and Nicaragua.

Turning to country situations, Mr. Turk focused extensively on the ongoing conflicts, including that of Sudan, the military operations in Gaza and the overall situation of the Occupied Palestinian Territories as well as the war in Ukraine. He called on all conflicts to end and reminded the importance of respecting international humanitarian law, including refraining from selling weapons to any party to an armed conflict.

Later that week the Council held the general debate on the High Commissioner's update, which was preceded by an oral update by the Group of Human Rights Experts on Nicaragua. They continue to report facts that constitute crimes against humanity, including widespread use of torture and arbitrary detention, as well as persisting violations of the right to self-determination of indigenous peoples. The group of experts expressed particular alarm over the transnational repression of Nicaraguans and recommended that the Council addresses the situation under item 4: country situations requiring the Council's attention. During the ensuing debate, few States pointed to this situation. The majority of speakers reacted to the High Commissioner's update and continued to express concerns, of varying degrees, over the situation in Gaza, while many European States focused extensively on Ukraine. While we did not take part in the general debate under item 2, the attack on civil and political rights, which the High Commissioner underlined in his update, was at the centre of Right Livelihood's advocacy efforts throughout the session. In particular, our initiatives were geared towards raising awareness of the situation of Laureates behind bars.

At the interactive dialogue with the Working Group on enforced disappearances, we delivered a statement on behalf of Abdullah al-Qahtani, son of Dr. Mohammed al-Qahtani (2018 Right Livelihood Laureate) who highlighted the case of his father, forcibly disappeared for two years, and called on the Council to demand that the Saudi government immediately

and unconditionally release him. Together with ALQST for Human Rights, we also raised his situation at the general debate on country situations requiring the Council's attention (GD4). There, we pointed out the extremely worrying trend, to which Dr. al-Qahtani is also subjected, of retrying human rights defenders after completion of their unjust sentences. We called on the Council to urgently address the situation of human rights in Saudi Arabia under this item. At the time of writing these highlights, Mohammed al-Qahtani was finally able to talk to his family after 2 years and 10 days of incommunicado detention, nevertheless, the unfair additional criminal proceedings against him continue. We will thus continue to call for his immediate, unconditional release, and for accountability to finally become a reality in Saudi Arabia.

Another situation that remains of great concern, which was the focus of our advocacy this session, is the case of 10 activists affiliated with Mother Nature Cambodia (MNC, Right Livelihood Laureate 2023). On July 2, they were sentenced between 6 to 8 years for allegedly "plotting against the government" and "insulting the king." Five of them were violently arrested and are now held in facilities scattered across the country. We thus raised their case at the Interactive Dialogue with the Special Rapporteur on Cambodia and asked how he intended to scale up his interactions with Cambodian civil society, given the increasing scale of the repression. The Special Rapporteur did not answer our question directly but said that he recommended civil society organisations to make full leverage of the UN system to achieve accountability. Among the States that took the floor, it is worth mentioning that Belgium also highlighted the case of MNC, calling for the release of all those detained and the halting of their persecution. The session also saw the adoption of Cambodia's Universal Periodic Review outcome. Out of the 275 recommendations received, the country supported 232 and noted 43. Among the latter are some requesting to release political prisoners and others which the country considered to be "politicised" or "baseless."

The third case that we brought to the attention of the Council is that of political prisoners in Belarus. Together with Human Rights Center "Viasna" (2020 Right Livelihood Laureate), we delivered a statement at the first interactive dialogue with the Group of Independent Experts on the situation of human rights in Belarus. While we welcomed the release of some political prisoners, we pointed out that the authorities persist in labelling dissenting voices as extremists or terrorists. There remain over 1300 political prisoners, living in inhumane conditions and with extremely limited communication channels with the outside world. With the 2025 presidential elections approaching, we continued to call for more International accountability, urging concerned States to use their universal jurisdiction provisions.

The September session also holds its traditional dialogue on the Secretary General's report on reprisals against those collaborating with the UN. This year's report included cases from 32 countries across all regions. This included follow-up information on Mohammed al-Qahtani, previously mentioned in multiple yearly reports. Unfortunately, the office of the Secretary-General continues to observe a trend of self-censorship, as many human rights defenders fear increased reprisals if their names appear publicly in such reports. This was the case of at least 32 individuals in 6 different Member States, who requested not to be included. In addition, Ms. Brands Kehris, Assistant Secretary General, expressed particular concern at allegations of reprisals against young people, affecting at least 20 young men and women, and documented for the first time. The fact that these reprisals take place within

Palais des Nations, sometimes by Members of the Human Rights Council, remains extremely worrying.

While our advocacy efforts were wired towards Laureates behind bars, the September session is known to hold multiple debates on the rights of Indigenous Peoples, a topic relevant to numerous Right Livelihood Laureates. This year, the interactive dialogue with the Special Rapporteur on the rights of Indigenous Peoples focused on the specific challenges faced by Indigenous persons living with disabilities. States overwhelmingly agreed with the Special Rapporteur on the importance of providing accessible and affordable healthcare and shared their national action plans on the matter. The interactive dialogue with the Expert Mechanism on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples on the other hand focused on a study of how national laws and policies are implementing the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, highlighting the legal obligation of States towards it. Delegations in the room called for the removal of barriers to Indigenous Peoples' participation in decision making and several States, including Australia and Finland, expressed great concern at increasing reprisals against Indigenous peoples worldwide. Lastly, the council also held a full-day panel discussion on the same topic, where the speakers pointed out a great need for more recognition of Indigenous Peoples' collective rights, not only *de jure* but also *de facto*.

At the end of the session, the Council adopted 38 texts, 28 of which were by consensus. Nine country mandates were extended, including that on the situation of human rights in the Russian Federation as well as one thematic mandate: the Special Rapporteur on Climate Change. Among thematic resolutions, we note with appreciation that the Council adopted a new text on "human rights on the internet" which recognised that access to the internet is essential for the enjoyment of human rights, and condemns online censorship and shutdowns. Nevertheless, concerns remain regarding the lack of action taken by the Council in relation to the crimes committed against the Palestinian People, as well as the lack of consideration for the long-standing problematic situation of human rights in Saudi Arabia, as highlighted above. In addition, we remain particularly alarmed by the continuing financial liquidity crisis of the United Nations, which affects the workings of a wide number of mandates and mechanisms and raises doubts about States' political will to continue engaging constructively on human rights.