

United Nations Human Rights Council: 22nd Session

Item 3: ID with the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders

Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies (CIHRS) – Joint Oral Intervention with the Forum of Independent Human Rights NGOs

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Thank you, Mr. President.

As described in the report submitted by the Special Rapporteur on Human Rights Defenders this session, human rights civil society organizations worldwide are increasingly subjected to a range of repressive laws and practices designed to isolate them and destroy their ability to function or even exist. In many countries, this recent proliferation of highly repressive measures threatens to entirely eliminate well-established human rights communities.

For example, as noted in the Special Rapporteur's report, Egyptian human rights defenders and civil society organizations "are being increasingly targeted by...restrictions which seriously impede the ability of such organizations, and human rights defenders working with them, to fully carry out their key activities". Proposed legislation on civil society, if passed, would represent the most restrictive ever seen in Egypt. Such restrictions include bans on funding from non-national sources and prohibitions on engagement with international institutions without government approval, and criminal sanctions for any individual or organization which fails to fully comply with the association law. Finally, for the first time, these proposed laws would establish a direct role for the security apparatus in approving or rejecting the establishment and activities of NGOs.

Such restrictions have already begun to take effect, even before any of this legislation has been passed. For example, the New Woman Foundation has been forced to drastically cut staff and activities due to the government's refusal to approve its funding. Last month, a letter was sent by the Prime Minister to one of the oldest rights organizations in Egypt, the Egyptian Organization for Human Rights, warning it against cooperating with foreign bodies. Also worrying is that the politically-motivated prosecution of a number of NGOs working in Egypt in late 2011 continues to this day.

Unfortunately, the Egyptian government has failed to respond to the majority of inquiries made by the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders regarding complaints submitted to her regarding rights violations in the country. Nor has the government allowed the Special Rapporteur to perform a visit to the country, despite requests that have been pending for over ten years.

The crackdown on Egyptian civil society is an important case, yet it is not an isolated incident. We are currently witnessing a global trend towards repression of civil society and human rights defenders that has the potential to be extremely detrimental to the advancement and protection of human rights worldwide. Unless resolute and urgent action is taken to stop these and similar schemes aimed at shutting down civil society and silencing HRDs, the current tenure of the OHCHR may witness the elimination of vast numbers of human rights actors across the globe.

Thank you, Mr. President.