



**SPEAK UP**  
STOP DISCRIMINATION

# HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS ACTING AGAINST DISCRIMINATION

## INFORMATION NOTE

### HUMAN RIGHTS DAY 2010

*“On Human Rights Day 2010 we are declaring our solidarity with, and our admiration for, people of conscience: the men and women, young and old, of all nationalities and from endlessly diverse backgrounds who stand their ground and speak up for human rights.”*

*(Navi Pillay, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights)*

Human rights defenders acting against discrimination, often in the face of great personal risk to both themselves and their families, are being recognized and acclaimed on Human Rights Day, 10 December 2010.

Human rights defenders speak out against abuse and violations including discrimination, exclusion, oppression and violence. They advocate justice and seek to protect the victims of human rights violations. They demand accountability of perpetrators and transparency in government action. In so doing, they are often putting at risk their own safety, and that of their families.

#### Who is a human rights defender?

*“Human rights defender is a title each and every one of us can earn. It is not a role that requires a professional qualification. What it depends on is regard for our fellow human beings, an understanding that we are all entitled to the full range of human rights and a commitment to seeing that ideal become a reality.”*

*(Navi Pillay, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights)*

Some human rights defenders are famous, but most are not. They are active in every part of the world, working alone and in groups, in local communities, in national politics and internationally.

They are of all ages and have diverse backgrounds and occupations.

Many are highly qualified people who have special skills as lawyers, journalists, doctors, architects, teachers: many others have little or no education but they all have in common the fundamental conviction that human rights must be protected and promoted.

Everyone can advance and speak up for human rights no matter who they are or where they are from. Each one of us has the potential to make a difference.

#### Violations committed against human rights defenders

*“In deciding to act on principle, the security of human rights defenders and their ability to work is often jeopardized, either by blatant repression and violence, particularly in areas of conflict, or by increasingly insidious patterns of restrictions and abuse. Each one of us has a responsibility to support their efforts and to add our voices to those who demand protection for the defenders and their families.”*

*(Navi Pillay, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights)*



The activities of human rights defenders galvanize action and spur change. In many countries, history has proved to be on the side of defenders. Often, however, defenders' actions are met with hostile, negative reactions from individuals, groups, and authorities. This can be true in both emerging democracies and States with long-established democratic traditions.

Human rights defenders are very vulnerable in conflict situations and in States without a solid rule-of-law foundation where human rights are violated frequently and with impunity. Thousands of human rights defenders lose their jobs, are threatened, harassed, defamed, imprisoned illegally, tortured, murdered and forced into exile. Even in States with a democratic tradition and functioning judicial institutions there can be, and often are, violations of the fundamental rights of those who are themselves standing up for the human rights of others.

The situation of women human rights defenders is often especially precarious. In traditional societies where their roles are clearly restricted, women defenders may encounter vociferous and aggressive opposition to their activism from members of their own communities. Women defenders who have been sexually assaulted because of their human rights work are often perceived to have shamed their families and communities. Because women are the principal care-givers, their harassment and persecution as defenders exposes their children and families to abuse and hardship. Protection of families of human rights defenders is of critical importance.

Defending the human rights of migrants also entails multiple difficulties and risks. Migrants often have no legal resources of any kind. They may also face prejudice, hostility and discrimination in the communities where they settle.

### Protection of and support for human rights defenders

*“Let us be absolutely clear about this: States are responsible for ensuring the security of human rights defenders. In the event of violations, they have a further responsibility to investigate and prosecute the offenders and compensate the victims.”*

*(Navi Pillay, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights)*

The Declaration<sup>1</sup> on human rights defenders recognizes that the implementation of international human rights standards is to a great extent dependent on the activities of human rights defenders and that defenders, precisely because of their work, often require additional protection.

In 2000, the UN Secretary-General appointed a special representative whose role it is to monitor and support the implementation of the Declaration. The current Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders is Margaret Sekagya.

In March 2010, the Human Rights Council expressed grave concern at the continuing threats and attacks faced by many human rights defenders and adopted a resolution on their protection which identifies the State as having the key role in fully supporting human rights defenders and promoting for them a safe and enabling environment.

The resolution is also clear that when there are violations against human rights defenders States should ensure that incidents are promptly and impartially investigated and the perpetrators prosecuted.

<sup>1</sup>The Declaration on the Right and Responsibility of Individuals, Groups and Organs of Society to Promote and Protect Universally Recognized Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms was adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1998.

### CONTACT US

Visit our Human Rights Day webpage [www.ohchr.org/hrday2010](http://www.ohchr.org/hrday2010) and download audiovisual and print materials, visual designs and more.

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### ABOUT THE UN HUMAN RIGHTS OFFICE

The United Nations Human Rights office, part of the UN Secretariat, has been given a unique mandate to promote and protect all human rights. Headquartered in Geneva, the Office is also present in some 50 countries. Headed by the High Commissioner for Human Rights, a position established by the General Assembly in 1993 to spearhead the UN human rights efforts, the Office takes action based on the unique mandate given it by the international community to guard and advocate for international human rights law. For more information please visit [www.ohchr.org](http://www.ohchr.org)



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