

Cote d'Ivoire: Regional consultation on protecting civic and democratic space and strengthening the protection of defenders in times of crisis

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From 18th to 20th October 2021, ISHR hosted a regional consultation on protecting civic and democratic space and strengthening the protection of human rights defenders in times of crisis, which took place in Abidjan. The main objectives were to discuss the restrictions faced by human rights defenders in times of crisis and develop strategies to ensure a better protection by the different actors involved, especially through ensuring that legislative advancements for the protection of defenders made in the region are not lost.

The work of defenders is and remains crucial to strengthen good governance, democracy, development, the opening of civic space and the respect of human rights. This was raised during the opening ceremony.

During those three days, defenders discussed on the impact of measures taken by the authorities to combat covid-19 on the work of defenders and shared their experiences.

The panel held on the first day was marked by interventions from coalitions of human rights defenders from Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, Niger, Mali and Sierra Leone. They noted the restrictions faced by defenders and the impact on their work, the cases of reduction of civic and democratic space by the measures taken by the States and the good practices that they have been implemented and those of the authorities that have favoured the continuity of their work. They also addressed recommendations to the authorities and the Special Rapporteurs present.

To help defenders continue their vital work for the protection of human rights during crises, a [compendium of good practices](#) analysing experiences of defenders in Côte d'Ivoire, Mali, Niger, Sierra Leone and Burkina Faso was shared with the participant. It's a document that aim to facilitate the continuity of defenders' work in times of covid-19 and other crises. The compendium has been produced by ISHR with the support of national coalitions on the basis of an analysis considering the good practices developed by defenders and governments and the provisions of mechanisms for the protection of the rights of human rights defenders.

The second day of the consultation was marked by the opening ceremony, which included speeches from the CNDH, ISHR, the special rapporteurs, the Ambassadors of Belgium and Switzerland in Côte d'Ivoire and the representative of the Minister of Justice and Human Rights. There was also panel discussions with special procedures.

“As we seek to rebuild our societies after the health crisis, civil society must be seen as a partner not an enemy in this important effort. The exclusion of [civil](#) society, defenders, including trade unions, from the planning and implementation of the response to Covid19 has accelerated the deterioration of the already fragile civic and democratic space before the pandemic” said Clement Voule, United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Rights to Freedom of Peaceful Assembly and of Association (FOAA).

[Anne Lugon Moulin, Switzerland Ambassador in Cote d'Ivoire](#) noted that many countries tend to restrict public freedoms and the role and space for engagement of non-gouvernemental actors. Noting this [Switzerland](#) issued guidelines in 2019 for the protection of [defenders](#). To conclude she commended Côte d'Ivoire for having adopted a law promoting and protecting the rights of defenders in 2014 as well as an implementing decree in 2017.

Furthermore, it should be noted that before the outbreak of the covid-19 pandemic, some African countries began the process of adopting laws to protect human rights defenders with the support of ISHR.

In that regards, [Michael Wimmer, Belgium Ambassador in Côte d'Ivoire](#), in his statement strongly encouraged the process of adoption of laws on the protection of human rights defenders through the support of ISHR. “It's also important, especially in contexts such as the pandemic, that platforms exist where authorities, [defenders](#) and international experts can exchange and come up with inclusive recommendations. A strong and ongoing commitment to fundamental freedoms is essential. This must be

done at the level of the State and be promoted by a dynamic and free civil society” added Michael Wimmer, Belgium Ambassador.

[The United Nations Special Rapporteur on human rights defenders, Mary Lawlor](#), connected virtually and seized the opportunity of the regional consultation to congratulate the government of Cote d'Ivoire for the adoption of the law 2014 on the protection of defenders. She also added that one of the objectives of her mandate is to be a mechanism easily accessible and useful to [defenders](#).

To ensure a better protection of defenders all the speakers unanimously urged the government of Cote d'Ivoire to effectively implement the defenders' protection mechanism with the involvement of civil society.

“Since the beginning of this health crisis, civil society organisations working in Africa have faced and continue to face numerous restrictions preventing them from implementing their work and continuing to hold states accountable for human rights violations. This is why it was important for ISHR to ensure that civil society continues to have the financial means to pursue their activities, and that at the highest levels of international and regional human rights bodies their voices continue to be heard and listened to” concluded Adélaïde Etong Kame, ISHR Africa Programme Manager.

In the fight against the Covid-19 pandemic, governments had to take decisions and measures which impacted human rights, fundamental freedoms, the continuity of the work of defenders and the enjoyment of civic and democratic space. The panels of this second day were focused on exchanges with special rapporteur's, their mandate and their actions to ensure the protection of defenders and civic space during the pandemic, defenders sharing their experiences on the impact of the Covid-19 on their work and proposing strategies to special procedure.

In light of this, the Special advisor of the United Nations Special Rapporteur on human rights defenders, Ed O'Donovan, highlighted that he would like to better understand how advocacy by the Special Rapporteur can provide more of a contribution to the security of defenders and that one of his objectives during the session was to demystify the workings of the mandate, especially how it can be accessed and realistically what it can do and what it can't do.

The third day of the activity was focused on a consultation with civil society on [the Resolution 44/20, on the promotion and protection of human rights in the context of peaceful demonstrations](#) adopted 17th July 2020 by the Human Rights Council. In addition to encouraging greater respect for the right to freedom of peaceful assembly and closely related rights, the resolution invited [the Special Rapporteur on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association, Clément Voulé](#) to prepare “a report on the protection of human rights in the context of peaceful demonstrations in crisis situations”. The consultation gathered the views and (life) experiences from civil society and defenders on how human rights could be protected in the context of peaceful assemblies during crisis situations.

In parallel, ISHR alongside the UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of association and assembly, the special advisor to the Special Rapporteur on defenders, Frontline Defenders and the Ivoirian Coalition for human rights defenders, also met with the President of the National Council for Human Rights, the Minister of Justice and Human Rights, the Director of Cabinet of the Ministry of the Interior and Security, the Minister of Defense and the Special Advisor to the President of the Republic, in charge of Human Rights. This was an opportunity to further discuss the establishment of the defenders' protection mechanism in Côte d'Ivoire.