

**Statement by DefendDefenders NGO observer Status 359 presented by Ms Walda Keza Shaka**

Honourable Chairperson,

Distinguished commissioners,

Ladies and gentlemen!

We welcome the report of the Special Rapporteur on Human Rights Defenders in Africa and would like to reiterate the many challenges faced by Human Rights Defenders in Africa such as impunity, domestic violence and internet accessibility issues.

We have documented a range of acute threats around digital security in Africa during this pandemic as HRDs have moved their work online across the globe. HRDs are now more vulnerable because they cannot resort to previous personal security measures such as frequently changing location and routes to avoid being followed. The people who may want to threaten them now know where they are day and night due to lockdowns. We have also noted that the COVID19 Pandemic has become a pretext to postpone elections in some countries in Africa. Governments should not suspend their consultations with citizens and civil society, but they should put in place necessary measures for democratic processes to continue in a safe manner.

Honourable Chairperson,

Over the last six months we have documented cases of human rights violations against hrds, journalists and artists on the continent and the statistics are alarming with a total of up to 82 cases being recorded during this period. We documented 26 cases in North Africa, 11 cases in West Africa, 12 cases in Central Africa, 22 cases in East and Horn of Africa and 11 cases in Southern Africa. These cases were ranging from violations against freedom of expression, right to personal liberty, freedom of peaceful assembly and association amongst others

Tanzania recorded an increase in the arrest of activists, among others the renowned Tanzanian comedian Idris Sultan who was released on

bail in May 2020. Those who are still in prison face a heightened risk of contracting the life-threatening virus given poor prison conditions.

We have seen an increasing limitation on the work of HRDs in Ethiopia and Uganda. Authorities in Mauritania are still arresting bloggers and HRDs. The Moroccan government attempted to adopt a law restricting the use of social media. But due to civil society pressure the bill was overturned. The Egyptian government is using the counter-terrorism law to curb freedom of expression. And more lawyers and HRDs are being imprisoned unlawfully.

Despite the call made by Madam Michelle Bachelet and this very commission in preventing the devastating impact of COVID19 in places of detention, many HRDs in Africa still remain in prisons particularly in Burundi, Cameroon, Egypt, Tanzania, Algeria and Zimbabwe. These are cases of HRDs who have been targeted specifically for telling the truth about COVID-19, or fighting impunity and corruption, including criticizing how their governments have dealt with the COVID crisis.

Honourable Chairperson,

It is important for this august Commission to share best practices with African States in securing releases using strategies that not only advocate for the release of HRDs on the basis of the unlawful detention but also on health grounds.

Honourable chairperson,

As we are preparing to celebrate the Pan-Africa Women's Day on 31 July, We would like to bring to your attention that many women are unable to report cases of violence against them, and WHRDs are also unable to provide the victims with the assistance they need due to movement restrictions. The increasing impunity on violence against WHRDs is alarming on the continent. Just last month, the Appeals court in Maputo- Mozambique overturned the verdict handed to Rufino Licuco by the High Court of Mozambique in February 2017 for the crime of serious physical and psychological violence against Josina Machel, an activist with Kuhluka Movement which left her blind in her right eye.

The Appeals court's decision magnifies the continuous contention between women who seek justice, and the resolution of cases

demonstrates the paradox of both the interpretation and application of the law. It is a revelatory example of the glaring shortfalls of implementation of legal frameworks and legislation designed to serve and protect survivors and victims of gender-based violence across the continent.

Honorable Chairperson,

Women Human Rights Defenders play a critical role in advancing the rights of women and girls, challenging inequalities and holding those in power to account. We call on this Commission to urge State Parties to implement the recommendations contained in the Study of the Commission on Women Human Rights Defenders in Africa adopted in 2014.

I thank you Chairperson