



AFRICANDEFENDERS
Pan-African Human Rights Defenders Network



DEFENDDEFENDERS
East and Horn of Africa Human Rights Defenders Project

Statement on the report of the Special Rapporteur on Refugees, Asylum Seekers, Internally Displaced Persons and Migrants in Africa at the 68th session of the African Commission on Human and People's Rights

Observer Status No. 359

Honorable Chairperson,

Honorable Commissioners,

Distinguished ladies and gentlemen!

Allow me on behalf of DefendDefenders and AfricanDefenders to welcome the report of the Special Rapporteur on Refugees, Asylum Seekers, Internally Displaced Persons and Migrants in Africa. We wish to reiterate that many human rights defenders on the continent are currently living in exile, a situation that is self-imposed as a measure to protect themselves from threats associated with their work. These threats that are mostly perpetrated by state security agents and/or non-state armed groups, include judicial harassment comprising selective application of repressive laws to target and silence human rights defenders; direct threats such as surveillance, harassment and death threats; arbitrary arrests, abductions, and enforced disappearances; and smear campaigns.

Honorable Chairperson,

Since 2015, human rights defenders from Burundi have been fleeing their home country in search for a safe haven following consistent threats and attacks as a result of their work to expose grave violations of human rights and international law in the country. Many were hopeful that the situation in Burundi would stabilize and allow for the repatriation of exiled human rights defenders following the election of President Evariste Ndayishimiye, however, it is unfortunate to note that to date, we are still supporting at risk human rights defenders to relocate to other countries under our Ubuntu Hub Cities initiative.

In Nigeria, many youth activists were forced to leave their homes as a result of the government's crackdown on all those that played a role in the organization of the October 2020 #EndSARS protests. Several of these activists are still unable to return home as their safety in Nigeria is not yet guaranteed.

Human rights defenders in North Africa particularly from Egypt, Tunisia, Libya, Algeria and Morocco, continue to live in limbo due to the unfavorable working environments in their home countries. Bahey eldin Hassan, director of the Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies, was in August 2020 sentenced to 15 years in prison despite living in exile since 2014 as a result of his activism work.

Honorable Chairperson,

While in exile, human rights defenders continue to face many challenges to their livelihoods. Exile is not always a guarantee of safety and security and many defenders are often exposed to online surveillance and other forms of virtual threats when they attempt to continue their activism work. These threats also sometimes extend to their physical space especially when they are in locations that are in close geographical proximity to their home countries. This is mostly due to the presence of strong diplomatic and political influences between neighboring countries.

Furthermore, exiled human rights defenders often face economic challenges as finding employment is not an easy task especially with the current floundering economies and saturated job markets in most parts of Africa as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Women human rights defenders face additional economic challenges when living in exile with their dependents as it becomes more difficult for them to provide for their families without a reliable support system. Immigration status regularization also forms a barrier to socio-economic integration as it hinders defenders' ability to legally access employment and social services.

Additionally, a crucial yet often overlooked aspect of exile is the pressure on the psychological wellbeing of defenders as a result of constant threats, economic challenges, and the lack of access to their support systems and psychosocial support services.

Honorable Chairperson,

The protection of human rights defenders is paramount to the advancement of human rights on the continent. We call on this Commission to ensure that state parties meet their obligations under the Grand Bay Declaration, the Kigali Declaration, and the Cotonou Declaration on strengthening and expanding the protection of all human rights defenders in Africa; and urge state parties to ease visa and asylum procedures for human rights defenders at risk and ensure that the rights of migrants and refugees are respected.

I thank you, Honorable Chairperson.