

Statement on the report of the Special Rapporteur on Human Rights Defenders in Africa at the 68th session of the African Commission on Human and People's Rights

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Honourable Chairperson,

Honourable Commissioners,

Distinguished ladies and gentlemen!

We welcome the report of the Special Rapporteur on Human Rights Defenders in Africa and condemn the many challenges faced by human rights defenders including police brutality, unfair trials, censorship and arbitrary arrests.

Over the last nine months, we have documented an increase of cases of human rights violations against human rights defenders, journalists and artists on the continent and the statistics continue to be alarming with up to 216 cases recorded during this period. We documented 67 cases in North Africa, 39 cases in West Africa, 23 cases in Central Africa, 68 cases in East and Horn of Africa and 19 cases in Southern Africa. These cases ranged from violations against freedom of expression, right to personal liberty, peaceful assembly and association among others.

Honourable Chairperson,

During election periods there was an increase in human rights violations. In Uganda we recorded over 40 violations against human rights defenders and journalists during the 2021 general elections. Furthermore, there is an increase in the use of blanket wide internet shutdowns and restrictions of popular social media applications during election periods to restrict monitoring and reporting of electoral processes. This trend was witnessed in Chad, Uganda, Congo Brazzaville and Niger.

Government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic continues to be pestilent on the continent. Human rights defenders have mobilised peaceful protests in response to states' handling of the pandemic, repressive policies silencing dissenting voices and rapidly shrinking civic space. State apparatus are used to crackdown on peaceful protests with violence, arbitrary arrests and unfair trials such as in the case of #EndSars protests in Nigeria , #ZimbabweanLivesMatter in Zimbabwe, and #ShutItAllDown protests to spotlight gender-based violence in Namibia. Moreover, allies of protest movements such as journalists covering the protests are also targeted.

Honourable Chairperson,

Artists are silenced for their critical expressions. Their work calling on states to address violations of fundamental freedoms continues to be criminalised through the use of repressive laws such as anti-terrorism legislations and public order laws. Shady Habash, a 24 year old filmmaker from Egypt, died in prison after being held in pre-trial detention for two years because of a video he worked on that criticises the government.

Human rights defenders working in conflict areas play a critical role in keeping warring parties accountable for human rights violations against civilians. However, they continue to operate in a climate of fear of reprisals from not only the state but also militant groups. This fear more often than not causes them to practice self-censorship.

Honourable Chairperson

It is important for this Commission to note that defenders working in conflict areas face additional health risks as COVID-19 mitigation interventions are scarce in conflict ridden areas. Additionally, journalists covering conflict also face risks of reprisals and sometimes lose their lives in the course of duty. For instance, Jamal Farah Adan from Somalia was gunned down in March 2021.

In light of this alarming trends, we call on the Commission to urge states to critically assess the state of artistic freedom especially in the context of the African Union Theme of the year 'Arts, Culture and Heritage: Levers for Building the Africa We Want', adhere to the commission's guidelines on freedom of assembly and association and policing and take the necessary steps to ensure the safety of human rights defenders working in conflict areas.

I thank you, Honorable Chairperson.