**Human Rights Council 52nd session**

**15 March 2023**

## **Introductory remarks by the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders, Mary Lawlor**

A/HRC/52/29 - Success through perseverance and solidarity: 25 years of achievements by human rights defenders

A/HRC/52/29/Add1 – visit to Greece

Excellencies, friends, this is a special Council presentation for me, as for once, my report is happy not sad, positive not negative, hopeful not painful.

As you know, this year marks the 25th anniversary of the Declaration on Human Rights Defenders, an important commitment to defenders which all of you have promised to meet.

Today I will share the amazing achievements of Human Rights Defenders all over the world, but first I want to report on my country visit to Greece in June last year.

I thank the State for inviting me and for their full cooperation during my mission. I also want to thank them for their engagement during the preparation of the report I'm presenting today, and to express my appreciation for all those who spoke with me over the course of my visit.

During my visit I encountered a rich and dynamic community of human rights defenders, and I witnessed first-hand their determination to see the rights of *all* respected and protected in Greece.

I learnt about the situation for women's rights defenders, journalists working on human rights issues, defenders of the rights of the LGBT community, human rights lawyers and others. My report makes recommendations to the State on how they can better support and protect them.

Yet while the environment for many human rights defenders in Greece is generally secure, this is *severely undermined* by the treatment of those seeking to defend the rights of migrants, refugees and asylum seekers.

Defenders active in this area, be they members of NGOs, journalists, lawyers or ordinary people engaging in simple acts of solidarity, humanity and kindness are under severe attack in Greece. They are being smeared, threatened and criminalised, with increasing pressure and intimidation from the Government.

Why is this happening? The root cause lies in the Government's policy on migration. While the failure of the EU to develop a fair, legal, accessible, equitable system for those in need of international protection is, in my view shameful, this in no way justifies the violation of the rights of refugees and migrants and those who seek to protect them from pushbacks and other attacks.

Human Rights Defenders who cite the need to respect international and European human rights and refugee law are often targeted.

One example is the treatment of Panayote Dimitras, a human rights defender with the Greek Helsinki Monitor who I met while in Greece. Since my visit, Panayote has been placed under criminal investigation for facilitating illegal immigration and been barred from continuing his human rights work.

His supposed 'crime'? Informing the Greek authorities of the presence of persons within Greek territory seeking to exercise their right to apply for asylum. This and other such cases should be a cause of shame for the State.

I urge the Government to consider the findings of my report and take action. I will continue to follow up on the recommendations I have made in it, and hope to count on the continued good faith and good will of the State to see them fulfilled.

Defenders in Greece are often attacked *because* they are achieving progress and *because* of their right to defend rights. Like many defenders around the world, they are victims of their own success.

My report I present to you today, called *Success through perseverance and solidarity: 25 years of achievements by human rights defenders,* is full of examples of what Human Rights Defenders have managed to do since the UN Declaration on HRDs was adopted in 1998.

In these 25 years, I have seen time and again that it is exactly because defenders peacefully confront powerful vested interests, because they expose corruption, because they refuse to accept injustice, because they challenge criminal gangs, because they talk about issues governments want to hide, because they tell the truth, and because they make good things happen that they are attacked.

Their legitimate vital peaceful work often goes uncredited and unacknowledged.

On every continent, Human Rights Defenders are achieving stunning success, in democracies and dictatorships, in cities, in forests and in deserts, and often in the face of terrible danger.

In Bangladesh, an organization run by children is preventing child marriages, even though its members receive death threats. In 2021, HRDs in Thailand have won a major court victory for local communities which will revoke unlawful title deeds on 23 plots, issued to oil palm plantations. In Zimbabwe HRDs have won damages in a series of cases which are holding the government accountable for police brutality.

Women human rights defenders in Indonesia played a vital role in passing a law last year criminalising physical sexual abuse, including in marriage, sexual exploitation, forced marriage, including of children, and the circulation of non-consensual sexual content.

And HRDs have won significant victories for the rights of LGBT people in many places in recent years. From Belize to Botswana, Saint Lucia to Sri Lanka and elsewhere, discriminatory laws and practices have been challenged and defeated.

The work of HRDs means people wrongly jailed have been freed from prison. Anti-corruption defenders in Ukraine successfully campaigned for a reduction in the price of a blood cancer drug, which reportedly fell from $90 to $2 a tablet.

These are major successes, and they deserve to be celebrated.

After the outbreak of COVID in Wuhan, 18 human rights lawyers based in China and overseas provided free legal advice and support to families of those who had died in Wuhan and Shanghai and obtained significant compensation payments for the families.

Rani Yan Yan is an indigenous woman HRD from the Chittagong Hill Tracts in Bangladesh. The Army wanted to build a five-star hotel in the area, threatening the local water supply and the displacement of 10,000 Mro persons. She helped organise young people to consult with local villagers in the middle of the night, to avoid surveillance. She and others publicised internationally what was happening, and the military now seems to have backed off the project.

Now, for some defenders, just managing to keep going in the face of extreme danger and threats is success in itself. Women HRDs have been organising and leading protests for women’s rights in Afghanistan, Burma and Iran, despite the extreme risks that they face.

HRDs working at Al-Haq, a Palestinian human rights organisation, have shown remarkable resilience despite office raids, a ban on their organisation, and the misuse of legislation to designate them a terroist organization for which no evidence was found.

The tenacity of these HRDs and others in continuing to document human rights violations demonstrates success in the face of severe challenges.

Since I took up this mandate three years ago, I have heard directly from well over a thousand HRDs.

Some turned to protecting the vulnerable during the COVID-19 pandemic, others have saved lives by rescuing refugees and migrants from the sea, some have advanced the rights of women to bodily autonomy, secured the release of those wrongly imprisoned, brought perpetrators of State violence to justice, exposed the adverse impact of business in the context of land, environment and indigenous peoples’ rights, and made many other vital contributions helping others.

Through imagination and perseverance, with hope and solidarity, human rights defenders continue to succeed against intimidating odds and often despite threats and attacks. These victories are usually the result of long-term struggles and are typically achieved in collaboration with other human rights defenders, and with a broad range of allies.

This year, I am listening particularly to the challenges faced by young defenders and children who are human rights defenders, from across the world. They will be the ones who carry the human rights struggle forward into the future

In 1998 the Declaration was adopted by consensus and you all agreed to respect and implement it.

Yet in very many places, State officials vilify and target HRDs in an effort to undermine their work. This must stop. States have to start recognising the crucial work they do to help build equal and just societies.

This is not an impossible job, as we have seen that when States and HRDs work together change is possible.

Finally let me say to all HRDs everywhere, I salute your courage, your persistence, your hope, your resilience and your vision of a better world. When I think of you, I am reminded of the words of the Irish playwright George Bernard Shaw which you embody.

**“Life is no brief candle to me. It is a sort of splendid torch which I have got a hold of for the moment, and I want to make it burn as brightly as possible before handing it on to future generations.“**