

**EU/UN Conference “Sixty years of the Universal Declaration
of Human Rights: The Defenders Take the Floor”**

**Address by Mary Lawlor, Director of Front Line
7 October 2008**

Thank you very much for inviting me to participate in this conference and greetings to friends here whose life's work continues to inspire us. In Front Line we focus all our activities on the protection of human rights defenders at risk through a fast and flexible programme based on what human rights defenders say they need.

This includes a 24-hour emergency response phone line in 5 languages; a grants programme to provide for the security needs of defenders; resource material and capacity building in Personal Security and Risk assessment and IT security; research on who the human rights defenders are and the risks they face; facilitating networking and exchange between defenders in different parts of the world; campaigning and lobbying on behalf of defenders at immediate risk. In emergency situations Front Line can facilitate temporary relocation.

For most of us our hope is that our family and friends will be healthy and happy. But for human rights defenders, there is an added moral imperative - Article 1 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights which they daily live out: *“All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood”*.

In this the 60th Anniversary year of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, we are, as always, stunned by the awesome courage of those we work for – the defenders of human rights who bring to life the aspirations of the Universal Declaration in their work to bring dignity and justice to all.

And so I would like to offer you **5 recommendations** for the protection of HRDs.

1- Support the UN & regional mechanisms for the protection of human rights defenders

The renewed mandate of the UN Special Rapporteur on human rights defenders (HRDs) must have strong political support from the European Union. Mrs Margaret Sekaggya, the new Special Rapporteur should benefit from the experience and the emerging political commitment of the European Union to support and protect HRDs worldwide, in particular

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in the context of the EU guidelines on HRDs and the implementation of local strategies, discussed and adopted by EU missions in 2007 and reviewed in 2008.

The EU should also promote and strengthen the work of Madame Reine Alapini Gansou , the Special Rapporteur on human rights defenders at the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights through technical and financial support and identify how it can support the mandate of the Inter-American Commission on human rights. The EU should also look at supporting and accompanying, as appropriate, the Working Group for an ASEAN Human Rights Mechanism, whose primary goal is to establish an intergovernmental human rights commission for ASEAN (Article 14 of ASEAN Charter, adopted at the 13th ASEAN Summit in November 2007).

There is also a need for better cooperation between the different regional mechanisms and with the UN. A very good example was the recent joint mission to Togo by the UN Special Rapporteur and the Special Rapporteur on HRDs at the African Commission. As regards the protection of HRDs in the 47 Member States of the Council of Europe, the UN, the CoE and the EU should work together, share information, and organise similar joint missions, as appropriate.

2- Train officials & diplomats at all levels on the protection of human rights defenders

The high turnover among diplomatic staff and civil servants, both at capital and mission levels, can lead to situations where action on supporting and protecting HRDs is driven by the personal dedication of the Head of Mission and staff, rather than by the EU guidelines on HRDs. Ongoing training on how to concretely implement the guidelines at all levels should be organised, with the direct input of HRDs and international NGOs who have an expertise in this field.

For instance, annual meetings of ambassadors at capital level should incorporate a module on HRDs, with HRDs and international NGOs invited as speakers. At mission level, training sessions on this issue should be systematically organised, with the full participation of HRDs in order to share experiences, mutually understand constraints and possibilities, and overcome obstacles so that HRDs in the country concerned feel more secure thanks to improved relationships with EU Missions.

3- Involve human rights defenders in the preparation, conduct, evaluation and follow-up of EU-third countries dialogues

The EU considers political dialogue as its main instrument for furthering its external relations. The EU should involve HRDs in the preparation, conduct, assessment and follow-up of any EU-third country meeting (summits, troika visits, human rights dialogues, cooperation councils...) and consult them in the establishment of human-rights related priorities for the dialogue. Of paramount importance should be the recognition of HRDs as important partners and the need to protect them in their efforts to build civil and just societies. Meetings with HRDs should be routine when high-level meetings between the EU and the third country government take place.

At mission level, the EU should develop contacts with relevant, independent HRDs and

human rights NGOs who should then be involved in the review of local strategies for the protection of HRDs, and informed – even informally – about action taken on their behalf and the outcomes achieved.

4- Improve protection of human rights defenders fleeing extreme insecurity, for rest and respite

EU member States, and in particular their visa services, barely understand the distinction between human rights defenders applying for temporary relocation and asylum seekers applying for refugee status. However, current practices largely illustrate that the overwhelming majority of HRDs who come to the EU for 'rest and respite' or to participate in all kinds of events do not ask for asylum, but go back to their countries to continue their work. Human rights defenders want to stay in their country and help build a civil and just society. In extreme situations, when no other relocation option is available in the country itself or in the sub-region, HRDs may look for safe places in Europe to stay for a while, the time needed to see a decrease in the level of insecurity and threats they face.

Recommendations adopted by the **Council** in June 2006, further to the first review of the implementation of the EU Guidelines on HRDs, call on the Member States - to consider *“developing protection tools for situations where the life or physical and mental integrity of HRDs may be at immediate risk”* and *“issuing of emergency visas for HRDs in grave danger, building on the experience and good practice of some member states”*.

In April 2007, the **European Parliament** adopted its **Annual Report on Human Rights**. The section on human rights defenders considers that *“the idea of issuing visas for human rights defenders in grave danger as recommended by the Council, should be an important priority”*.

These Council recommendations and the European Parliament Annual Report illustrate that there are concerns at European level about the issue of temporary relocation visas for HRDs. Member States should consider establishing specific written procedures for the quick delivery of temporary relocation visas for HRDs at risk, building on existing experiences and practices (Ireland, Spain), and promote awareness raising among those in charge of delivering visas at central and local levels (visa services, consulates, embassies) on the situation of human rights defenders and their special protection needs regarding emergency visas.

We have good experience of visas for human rights defenders in Ireland - since 2002 Front Line has invited over 450 human rights defenders to the Dublin Platform and for training sessions.

Since 2005, under the Facilitated Visa Procedure agreed in with the government, a total of 10 human rights defenders – coming from Syria, Iran, Ingushetia, Chechnya, Saudi Arabia, Sri Lanka, Western Sahara, Yemen – have received a temporary relocation visa. The Syrian HRD came twice under the scheme, and the two women HRDs from Grozny and Ingushetia came with their daughters aged 10 and 11 respectively for rest and respite. None of them applied for refugee status in Ireland.

This is one of the most practical tools at the disposal of the EU Member States, a tool that can save lives and give HRDs strength to continue their lonely and isolated work on their return.

HRDs coming to the EU under such schemes could be hosted by European 'shelter cities'. These cities could envisage setting up a network amongst them to share experiences and organise activities around the protection of HRDs, including awareness raising campaigns.

5- Develop a human rights defenders-based approach to development

The EU guidelines ascribe an important role to development agencies in the promotion and protection of human rights and of HRDs in particular. This reflects the now conventional wisdom that human rights and development are interlinked. Human rights defenders are key agents of change, are key agents of development while development agencies can play a key role in enhancing the protection of human rights defenders.

However, relations between development agencies and HRDs are still navigating in unclear water. HRDs are too often seen as “dangerous political activists” or “troublemakers” rather than “development actors”. There is also a lack of awareness at various levels (e.g. community, development agencies, civil society organizations, government institutions, UNDP, European Commission, etc.) on how the promotion of human rights contributes to and affects development. And it is even less clear how development agencies could effectively participate in the protection of human rights defenders. This requires more coherent processes and structures, such as involving HRDs in development processes including impact assessments; incentives in the fields of human rights and development; common training modules.

Effective development is conditional on freedom of expression and association. Without space for critical voices, terms such as accountability, partnership and participation are meaningless. As **Dr. Mudawi Ibrahim Adam** from Sudan Development Organisation says: *“Without transparency, good governance, accountability and respect for human rights, development aid in an environment like Sudan is just like throwing taxpayer’s money into the sea”*.

People like Dr. Mudawi, working in Darfur, holding workshops with different groups on human rights and peace-building and providing humanitarian assistance to the hundreds of thousands who have been forced to flee their homes as a result of the conflict, are the noblest people in the world. We have got to awaken a moral and philosophical duty to protect him and others like:

Gege Katana who works with victims of sexual violence in Eastern Congo at great personal risk and who has taken in 10 orphans displaced by the war to live with her, who says *“I cannot give up, the women have nowhere to go”*.

or **Ahmadjan Madmirov** in Uzbekistan whose 3 sons and 2 nephews have been imprisoned and tortured because of his work taking up the cases of those arrested and tortured, many of whom were persecuted because of their religious practice rather than any evidence of illegal activity.

or **Anwar al-Bunni**, a lawyer in Syria serving 5 1/2 years for defending human rights defenders and political prisoners.

or **Donny Reyes** in Honduras, gang raped because of his work on LGBT rights... and the right of lesbian and gay people to be simply treated as human.

or the **women human rights defenders** who said at a security training things like... and I quote: *“You never know when you will be arrested – you can be arrested at any time even in the street. It is painful to do this work. I have nightmares. I don’t feel strong doing it but I keep on doing it because it is important. I feel guilt and fear for my children. The children are targeted. I can’t sleep at night. No one knows where our office is – we keep it anonymous . Don’t put pregnant women and children at the front of a demonstration”*.

And there are so many I could talk about.

Sometimes courage is forced on us when we face bereavement, terminal illness or heartbreak, but it is a courage forced on us and one which we have no choice about.

Human Rights Defenders, who never know when they get up in the morning what the day will bring, and even if they will still be alive that night, display an exceptional kind of courage. They choose to put their lives on the line for the human rights of others.

It sounds strange, but as we work with human rights defenders who are on the front line, we have discovered that repression is almost a measure of effectiveness. Perpetrators choose who to target on the basis of who is being effective and challenging their interests. Nowhere is the unquenchable spirit of human rights defenders more evident than in the words of **Anna Politkovskaya**, the Russian human rights defender and journalist who was murdered for her work exposing human rights violations in Chechnya.

She said: *“So each time I go there, people tell me things. They do so in the sincere hope that, if I record what is actually happening, it will lead to change, to peace. Obviously, I am not to blame for what is going on, but the more I think about it, the more I would be betraying these people if I walked away. The only thing to do is to take this to the bitter end, so that no one can say that when things became difficult, I ran away.”*

Mary Lawlor