

Mr Volker Türk
United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR)
Palais Wilson
52 rue des Pâquis
CH-1201 Geneva, Switzerland.

1 July 2024

Dear High Commissioner/Your Excellency,

As civil society organisations (CSOs) from around the world who engage regularly with United Nations (UN) human rights bodies and mechanisms present in Geneva, we write to call on you and your office/to take urgent action to halt and reverse an increasing number of *unprecedented restrictions imposed on civil society* by the United Nations Office in Geneva (UNOG). Despite repeated attempts by CSOs to constructively engage with UNOG on these matters, these restrictions appear to be growing in number and severity, at the same time as predictability appears to be decreasing.

In a global environment of shrinking civil society space, we are particularly attentive to changes that may indicate a wider pattern of restrictions on civil society participation at the UN Human Rights Council (HRC) and access to and within UNOG premises. Taken together, the developments highlighted below have the practical effect of restricting access and engagement of civil society with Geneva-based UN human rights bodies, mechanisms and processes. If this pattern persists, it may result in permanent, wide-ranging negative impacts on both the ability of civil society to fully and freely engage with UN human rights bodies and mechanisms, as well as the proper functioning of these bodies and mechanisms that rely on the inputs and active involvement of civil society in Geneva as well as those outside Geneva to remain relevant and effective.

Temporary, exceptional security restrictions may, at times, be called for, and appropriate, proportionate measures against individual representatives of organisations that have disregarded the rules governing engagement and behaviour within UNOG premises are legitimate. However, in line with decades of practice, our concerns are greatly amplified by the severe lack of clarity, transparency, and predictability in the way these restrictions have been communicated and applied to civil society since they were put in place towards the end of last year.

For several years, CSOs have opposed the curtailment of civil society space within the processes of the HRC that have included a large reduction of speaking slots and side events provided to civil society. Over the last year, CSOs have been subjected to decisions that restrict the ability of their representatives with UNOG annual grounds passes to enter the premises of all UNOG buildings to attend UN meetings as well as meetings with UN officials and other stakeholders including UN Member States. Where previously access was on the same basis as other observers, the requirement for physical security screening (X-Ray), even for “blue badge” (annual grounds pass) holders, means that now civil society representatives can be subject to long lines and restricted to select entry points even during intense periods of activity. These new restrictions have come as a surprise for us as no clear

justification has been communicated to us and we are not aware of past practice on civil society access resulting in major security incidents.

Furthermore, restrictions on CSOs from approaching State delegations within the Palais des Nations' Room XX, reversing decades of practice, the reduction of seats for CSOs, and newly-imposed, arbitrary lack of flexibility to use empty seats at the back, as well as simply refusing access on the basis that Room XX is full, are all newly restrictive approaches that have caused concern. When seen in conjunction with what appear to be restrictive initiatives by certain States at the UN in New York, these developments appear to be a part of a larger attempt to limit civil society access at the United Nations in general. In addition, the [limitations on hybrid modalities](#), which also affect States and other observers, have a disproportionate impact on civil society, especially those who do not have representation in Geneva.

In this context, and given the centrality and importance of civil society engagement within Geneva-based UN bodies and mechanisms, the appropriate course of action should be to uphold an enabling environment for civil society as was envisioned within the founding documents of the UN HRC. We fear that these new measures run counter to the General Assembly's resolution that established the HRC, long-standing practice of UNOG on NGO access, and may have a cascading and chilling effect that reverses existing UN good practices on civil society access and participation.

The practice of the UN Commission on Human Rights (the Commission) and that of its successor, the HRC, have played a key role in shaping the manner in which CSOs access, and engage in, UN processes. General Assembly resolution 60/251 that establishes the Human Rights Council and resolution 5/1 of the Human Rights Council (the "Institution-Building Package") establish the role of NGOs as "observers" of the body. As such, the participation of NGOs "shall be based on arrangements, including Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31 of 25 July 1996, and practices observed by the Commission on Human Rights, while **ensuring the most effective contribution of these entities.**" (A/HRC/60/251, operative paragraph 11). By introducing unprecedented changes that limit the way UN spaces are accessed by NGOs in consultative status, these new measures run counter to long-standing practice in Geneva, and are jeopardising the ability of civil society to observe and to meaningfully and effectively participate at the HRC and other UN human rights bodies alongside other observers.

As the host of key UN human rights mechanisms and in recognition of the fundamental role civil society plays in the work of these bodies, UN spaces in Geneva have for many decades been more open to NGO engagement when compared to other multilateral spaces, including other UN headquarters. These practices have provided a critical means to ensure that the voices of human rights defenders and victims of human rights violations from throughout the world can inform the work and outcomes of UN human rights mechanisms. Now is not the time to abandon this long-standing productive relationship. *Thus, we urge you to firmly and unequivocally oppose these restrictions and make it clear that the longstanding practices of UNOG, the HRC and its predecessor, the Commission on Human Rights, regarding civil society participation and access should be upheld. In particular, we request you raise these concerns with the Director-General of UNOG, the Secretary-General and other relevant UN officials.*

We would be happy to schedule a time to discuss this matter with you at your earliest convenience and remain available to answer any questions you may have.

Signatories:

Asian Forum for Human Rights and Development (FORUM-ASIA)

Amnesty International

Center for Reproductive Rights

CIVICUS

Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies

DefendDefenders (East and Horn of Africa Human Rights Defenders Project)

International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH)

Franciscans International

Gulf Centre for Human Rights

Human Rights Concern - Eritrea

Human Rights Watch

International Commission of Jurists

International Service for Human Rights

Human Rights Concern – Eritrea

Human Rights House Foundation

Women's International League for Peace and Freedom