

We must ensure civil society and human rights defenders can engage with the UN without fear of reprisal

Delivered by Ambassador Barbara Woodward, UK Permanent Representative to the UN:

I have the honour to deliver this cross-regional statement on behalf of the United Kingdom and 79 other countries.

UN member states have repeatedly recognised that civil society and human rights defenders are crucial in supporting our work at the UN. We therefore condemn any act of intimidation or reprisal against individuals and groups who cooperate, seek to cooperate, or have cooperated with the UN.

We call on States to prioritise and support the meaningful participation of civil society at the UN. This involves taking action against intimidation and reprisals, including through robust investigations, to ensure accountability.

We also urge States to cooperate with the ASG for Human Rights, in fulfilling her mandate to address reprisals. We need a clearly-defined and coordinated approach to respond effectively to this growing issue.

We welcome the SG's most recent annual report, and share his concerns on the growing number of reprisals globally and the disproportionate impact on certain groups. This pandemic has exacerbated existing challenges for civic space. It has only brought new challenges and risks, including:

- Increased surveillance and hacking;
- The rise of online violence, particularly against women and girls; and
- The use of emergency measures to unduly restrict access and communication with the UN.

The cases documented in the SG's annual reports represent only the tip of the iceberg. We call for improvements in data collection and analysis to address gaps in the reports, such as climates of fear conducive to self-censorship.

We must ensure all civil society organisations and human rights defenders can engage the UN without fear of intimidation or reprisal. They dedicate their lives to serve their communities, some even risking their lives – they should not face further retaliation for engaging the international community.