

**Thursday, 4 October 2007:**

***Working session 17, Follow-up to the 12 and 13 July 2007 Supplementary Human Dimension Meeting on Promotion and Protection of Human Rights:***

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**Human rights defenders must be ensured better protection**

The International Helsinki Federation for Human Rights (IHF), together with several of its affiliated members, participated in the Supplementary Human Dimension Meeting on "Promotion and Protection of Human Rights: Responsibilities and Effective Remedies" (Vienna, 12-13 July 2007). During this meeting a session was dedicated to the role of human rights defenders in addressing human rights violations. In this regard, the IHF made several recommendations to the OSCE and its participating States so as to heighten the level of protection granted to human rights defenders in the region and the understanding of their fundamental role in society. This statement will cover some of the above-mentioned recommendations in more detail.

A written statement was also delivered to the July meeting addressing the challenges faced by human rights defenders in Azerbaijan, Belarus, the Russian Federation, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan.<sup>1</sup>

The work of human rights defenders has received growing recognition in recent years, and steps have been taken at the international level to improve their protection. However, in spite of this, human rights defenders continue to face serious challenges in many parts of the OSCE region, and in some countries, the capacities of independent human rights groups are increasingly being reduced as part of government policies to shield themselves from criticism and to retain power.

There is an urgent need for the OSCE participating States to reconsider their treatment of human rights defenders and to place new and greater emphasis on efforts to ensure that they can carry out their work without hindrance or harassment throughout the OSCE region. Given that the participating States have recognized human rights and fundamental freedoms as prerequisites for progress in setting up the lasting order of peace, security and cooperation that they seek to establish in Europe, they ought to address the work of human rights defenders as a shared priority. In particular, the participating States should consistently treat violations against human rights defenders as a matter of international concern and actively apply international standards relating to human rights defenders in their relations to third countries.

**Recommendations:**

The IHF makes the following recommendations to the OSCE and its participating States on how the protection of human rights defenders could be furthered:

1. The OSCE should consider expanding its commitments to include the principles enshrined in the UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders and in the EU Guidelines on Human Rights Defenders;
2. A high-level mechanism should be established by the OSCE with a mandate to promote visibility and recognition of the work of human rights defenders and other civil society activists and to improve their protection. The creation of such a mechanism, which might have the status of a special representative of the OSCE Chairman-in-Office, would be consistent with the historical commitment of the participating States to supporting civil society participation in the human dimension process. The mechanism would complement and reinforce the work of the UN Special Representative on Human Rights Defenders. It should also be able to intervene on individual cases in a speedy manner.

Although the IHF acknowledges the role and work of the ODIHR Focal Point on Human Rights Defenders, it believes that the above-mentioned mechanism would be better suited to help raise the profile of issues relating to civil society, ensure that an institutional focus is maintained on these issues and promote dialogue with states on the situation of civil society activists.

3. The participating States should integrate the protection of human rights activists into their broader policies toward third countries and, in this respect, ensure that human dimension commitments and other international standards relating to human rights defenders are adequately reflected in their policies. They should address concerns relating to human rights defenders in a consistent manner, which does not depend on the economic and political status of third countries, and make use of objective benchmarks against which progress can be measured. In elaborating and implementing their responses to the situation of human rights activists in different countries, they should consult with international and national NGOs.
4. The participating States should ensure that adequate funding is available for independent groups to carry out human rights work across the OSCE region. Relevant funding programs currently implemented at the national and multilateral level should be reviewed with a view of ensuring that the processes of obtaining funding are un-bureaucratic, transparent and flexible and that funding requirements do not instrumentalize NGOs but allow them to address core human rights problems in an impartial fashion, e.g. by monitoring the implementation of basic civil and political rights.
5. The participating States should increase political, moral and other forms of support to human rights defenders at risk in third countries, including by raising concerns about cases of persecution of human rights defenders with the governments of the countries concerned and making clear that violations of the rights of human rights defenders will have implications for mutual relations. They should also work together with international and national NGOs to provide concrete assistance to endangered human rights defenders, such as legal assistance, medical assistance and evacuation, safe relocation and temporary residence in emergency cases.
6. The OSCE should pay special attention to the challenges faced by woman human rights defenders and consider soliciting a study on their situation throughout the OSCE region.

To conclude, the IHF welcomes the resolution on human rights defenders adopted by the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly (Kiev, 5-9 July 2007) and joins its voice in urging OSCE participating States to reaffirm the important role of human rights defenders in protecting and promoting fundamental freedoms at the 2007 Ministerial Council in Madrid.

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<sup>1</sup> See [http://www.ihf-hr.org/documents/doc\\_summary.php?sec\\_id=58&d\\_id=4426](http://www.ihf-hr.org/documents/doc_summary.php?sec_id=58&d_id=4426)