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Human Rights Council: UN reform at risk

(Geneva) -- On the occasion of the fourth session of the Human Rights Council, human rights NGOs reaffirmed clearly today their support for the Special Procedures in the face of serious challenges by governments. Without independent and objective experts, the ability of the UN -- in particular the Human Rights Council -- to respond to violations will be severely compromised.

In UN General Assembly's resolution 60/251 establishing the Human Rights Council member states decided that "the Council shall assume, review and, where necessary, improve and rationalize all mandates, mechanisms, functions and responsibilities of the Commission on Human Rights in order to maintain a system of special procedures, expert advice and a complaint procedure" The United Nations Human Rights Council's special rapporteurs and representatives, independent experts and working groups -- collectively known as the "Special Procedures" -- are among the most innovative, flexible and responsive tools created by the UN to promote and protect human rights.

However, in Council discussions since the Council first met in June 2006, certain states tried to restrain special rapporteurs, for instance by introducing a "code of conduct". Despite the clear need for the Human Rights Council to strengthen the Special Procedures, several states are instead proposing changes that would cripple the ability of Special Procedures to promote and protect human rights effectively. Those states are disregarding the harm that such measures would do to the men, women and children whose human rights are violated every day in all parts of the world, and who look to the Special Procedures to intervene on their behalf in defense of their rights.

Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, la Fédération internationale des Ligues des Droits de l'Homme (FIDH), l'Organisation Mondiale Contre la Torture (OMCT) and Forum Asia today reaffirmed in Geneva the importance of the Special Procedures and the need not only to maintain them, but to reinforce them.

"A strong UN needs a strong Human Rights Council. And a strong Council needs a strong system of independent experts who are able to monitor effectively, respond rapidly and inform the Council of human rights violations throughout the world without political interference or intimidation. Victims and rights-holders deserve no less," said Irene Khan, Secretary General of Amnesty International.

"The special procedures are the most important legacy from the Commission to the Human Rights Council. They must be further strengthened, not undermined," said Reed Brody, spokesperson for Human Rights Watch.

"If the implementation of human rights requires political intervention, the assessment of their respect and the conformity of action at the national level with standards and international customary law should only be dealt with by experts who are independent, professionally qualified and free to act within their mandate", said Anne-Laurence Lacroix, Deputy Director of OMCT.

"One of the reason to upgrade the human rights system in the UN reform was to give human rights more visibility and importance in the UN system, therefore when states refuse to cooperate in the area of human rights, this should also be of concern to the Security Council in the same way the Security Council discusses lack of cooperation when a state doesn't meet its nuclear obligations," said Simia Ahmadi, FIDH representative at the UN in Geneva.

The "Etats généraux" on Human Rights invites all NGOs representatives attending the 2007 Human Rights Council to a discussion of NGO demands for the special procedures on Thursday 22th of March. 18:00 to 20:00, location to be determined.

Background

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The "Etats généraux" on Human Rights is an initiative of the Geneva Film Festival on Human Rights (FIFDH) and was formally established in early 2006. The aim is to offer a platform to all persons and organizations actively engaged in the defense of human dignity and fundamental rights. Most Geneva-based international organizations that actively promote human rights are part of it. The overall aim is to give a stronger voice to civil society as well as to national and international NGOs in Geneva.

To see the online petition supporting the Special Procedures, please go to www.actforspecialprocedures.org

Public Document

For more information please call Amnesty International's press office in London, UK, on +44 20 7413 5566

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