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UN General Assembly Third Committee puts resolution on human rights defenders to the test

The UN General Assembly Third Committee today adopted a resolution on human rights defenders¹ following intensive negotiations until the very last moment. The resolution recognises the important role of human rights defenders, and calls on States to take all measures necessary to ensure their rights and safety, and to maintain a safe and enabling environment for them.

Regrettably, for the first time in history, the resolution was adopted not by consensus, but by a recorded vote, at the request of China and Russia.

Prior to the vote, Norway - as the main sponsor of the resolution - made numerous changes to the text, thereby seeking to forge a compromise in response to the 39 amendments submitted by China, Iran and the African Group. In a [joint letter](#) issued on 24 November, over 150 NGOs raised concern about the substance of this unprecedented number of amendments, designed to weaken this important resolution. In view of the changes to the text made by Norway, the African Group withdrew all amendments.

Despite these efforts to reach consensus, China and Russia called for a vote on the resolution, stating that their main concerns had not been reflected. In doing so, they challenged why human rights defenders should be specifically protected. China and Russia were joined by 12 other States – Burundi, Democratic People’s Republic of Korea, Iran, Kenya, Nigeria, Myanmar, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, South Africa, Sudan, Syria, Zimbabwe – in voting against the resolution. Additionally, 40 Member States abstained in the vote.

Fortunately, the resolution was adopted, with 117 UN Member States voting in favour of the text.² The adoption of the resolution demonstrates the continued support for human rights defenders, who play a critical role at national, regional and international levels to defend the human rights of all.

Amnesty International is concerned by the actions taken by some Member States to undermine the crucial principles of the UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders adopted in 1998, thereby questioning the important role human rights defenders play as critical interlocutors in the struggle for human dignity, fairness, equality, respect and autonomy – all bedrocks of the human rights enshrined in the Universal Declaration on Human Rights and other human rights instruments.

¹ Full title of the resolution as adopted: “Human Rights Defenders in the context of the Declaration on the Right and Responsibility of Individuals, Groups and Organs of Society to Promote and Protect Universally Recognized Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms”.

² An overview of the vote is available here: http://www.un.org/en/ga/third/70/docs/voting_sheets/L.46.Rev.1.pdf.

Human rights defenders denounce abuse, injustice and discrimination, and call for accountability. Rather than being supported, they are in many places defamed, fined, obstructed, criminalised, imprisoned, 'disappeared' and killed for their work in raising awareness and concern about human rights issues. The need to protect human rights defenders is increasingly important given the growing challenges they face in all parts of the world. Restrictive laws, policies and practices close the space for human rights work which seeks to ensure that State and non-state actors remain accountable to individuals and communities.

The adoption of the resolution by the UN General Assembly Third Committee today is an important reminder to all Member States that they must never turn a blind eye to the challenges, intimidation and violence faced by human rights defenders.

Amnesty International urges all UN Member States to send a strong signal in support of human rights defenders by:

- **Voting in favour of this important resolution when it is considered for final adoption in the General Assembly Plenary in December this year.**
- **Take immediate and effective measures to implement the resolution at national level, including by fully recognising the important role of human rights defenders and by creating a safe and enabling environment in which they can carry out their work in the defence of human rights.**