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## **Challenges and proposals for strengthening civil society space: International Service for Human Rights, Amnesty International and others' joint oral statement<sup>1</sup> to the 25<sup>th</sup> Session of the UN Human Rights Council (3 – 28 March 2014)**

11 March 2014

Panel on the promotion and protection of civil society space  
Joint oral statement

Mr President,

Today, as the Council **recognises** the importance of civil society voices, we urge all States to do likewise.

Accusations that activism hinders progress or threatens security should not be tolerated. Questioning motives or methods of **protest** cannot justify a loss of rights. Laws restricting freedom of assembly - passed in Egypt, proposed in Spain - should be rescinded, whilst States must prevent and sanction the excessive use of force, of the kind seen recently in Venezuela and the Ukraine.

States should revoke **legislation** - like Ethiopia's - which criminalises NGOs on the basis of their funding or activities, and promote laws – like in Australia – which prohibit the State from doing just that. We urge the Council to condemn threatening legislation in countries including Nigeria, Uganda and Russia, which prohibit human rights advocacy relating to sexual orientation and gender identity.

States must **consult** civil society at the outset of policy development. Free, prior and informed consultation with communities affected by business projects can prevent

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<sup>1</sup> Joint oral statement delivered by International Service for Human Rights, non-governmental organization in special consultative status. Amnesty International, Canadian HIV/AIDS Legal Network, Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative, East and Horn of Africa Human Rights Defenders Project, Human Rights House Foundation, International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission, World Organisation Against Torture, non-governmental organizations in special consultative status. Peace Brigades International, Urgent Action Fund-Africa and Arc International, non-governmental organizations without consultative status, also support the views expressed in this statement.

conflict and violations. At the UN, civil society consultation is being stifled by repressive regimes through the ECOSOC Committee on NGOs. Pro-civil society States must respond to this, including by running for a seat on the Committee in April.

Mexico has shown good practise of how States should legislate to **protect** human rights defenders, but has also shown that good laws cannot be implemented without strong political backing, and that civil society space cannot be consolidated without impartial **investigations** to bring perpetrators to justice.

Both States and non-state actors can play a role in protecting human rights defenders and civil society space at home and abroad. We therefore commend Switzerland on the development of its Guidelines on Human Rights Defenders. The development of National Action Plans on Business and Human Rights presents an important opportunity in this regard.

Finally: when States fail to guarantee civil society space, activists often turn to the UN. When that avenue too is closed by intimidation and violence, we must speak out. I close by urging the Council, and the UN as a whole, to ensure a stronger, practical response to **reprisals**, and thus lead by example in protecting civil society space."