

Extraordinary Meeting of the Parties: Round Table on Environmental Defenders

United Kingdom statement:

Thank you, Chair. I would like to take the opportunity to thank the Aarhus Convention Secretariat for the invitation to speak at this Round Table. It is a privilege to be asked to contribute to such an important discussion, and alongside such esteemed speakers.

I would like to begin by reflecting on the disappearance of Dom Phillips and Bruno Pereira in the Amazon region of Brazil, and offering the UK's thanks to all those involved in the search and rescue operation to find them.

I'd like to pay tribute to both men and their commitment to improving our understanding of the Amazon, its peoples and the challenges currently faced there. Both men have left a strong legacy of defending and supporting the rights of indigenous peoples in Brazil.

Our thoughts are with their families and, in the case of Dom Phillips (who was a British journalist), we continue to provide consular support to them at this difficult time.

This Round Table takes place at an opportune moment, following the election of a Special Rapporteur to protect Environmental Defenders, based on the principles set out in Article 3 (8) and Decision VII/9 of the Aarhus Convention. The United Kingdom welcomes the creation of this vital position, and the election of Michel Forst as the first Special Rapporteur of this kind. We wish him well as he takes on his role, including in making operational the new rapid response mechanism to protect Environmental Defenders.

In light of the current situation around the world with regards to human rights defenders, as well as the war in Ukraine, there has never been a more important time for the Convention to ensure the rights of environmental defenders are protected. Human Rights Defenders have continued to raise their voices on the war in Ukraine, despite the immense dangers they face. They continue to speak out, in the hope to bring about a more stable, free, democratic, inclusive and prosperous society. They support peace building, improved and widened access to justice, and contribute to the protection of the land and the environment and thereby to people's livelihoods.

The UK has long outlined its support for the role and duty that Human Rights Defenders play within civil society. Our Equality and Human Rights Commission continues to encourage equality and diversity, eliminate unlawful discrimination, and protect and promote human rights. Human rights are basic rights and freedoms for everyone based on dignity, fairness, equality and respect. In 2013, the UK was the first country to produce a National Action Plan to implement the United Nations Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights (UNGPs). In this document, we outlined that businesses should respect human rights wherever they operate. In July 2019, the UK published its policy paper that has guided our support for Human Rights Defenders around the world. We have also committed to engaging and providing

assistance wherever possible through bilateral engagements and multilateral organisations around the world.

Through the multilateral system, the UK has demonstrated its commitment to Human Rights Defenders by working to strengthen and raise global standards for Human Rights Defenders:

- We have co-sponsored UN and other inter-governmental resolutions which have called for better protection for Human Rights Defenders, and the human rights standards they work to defend.
- We have supported UN and other multilateral efforts to elaborate and enforce responsibilities of third parties, including businesses, to proactively seek to respect the rights of Human Rights Defenders where relevant to their operations.
- We have worked with our partners to address and prevent acts of intimidation and reprisals against Human Rights Defenders seeking to cooperate with the UN.
- And we have supported the work of the UN Special Rapporteurs and other Special Procedures elsewhere who report on the situations of Human Rights Defenders, and human rights more generally around the world, and contributed to their recommendations on thematic reports.

At the 7th Session of the Meeting of the Parties last year, we shared our alarm at the serious situations faced by environmental defenders around the world. We expressed our concern that such persons are subject to threats as reported by UN member states, as well as intergovernmental and non-governmental organisations and stakeholders.

Human Rights Defenders perform a critical function within our societies, where they promote the rights of citizens and marginalised groups and shine a light on poor governance. Once more, we remain concerned that this function in our societies is not universally respected.

The UK further notes with concern the attacks on Human Rights Defenders working in the field of anti-corruption, as we did at the United Nations Human Rights Council in March 2022. We reiterate that attacks on Human Rights Defenders are often part of a wider trend of restrictions to civic space which must be reversed. In many countries across the world, Human Rights Defenders and civil society groups more broadly have increasingly found the space they operate in limited. This has been enacted through a range of restrictive legislation, persecution, and the silencing of dissent. We are acutely aware therefore that the role of Human Rights Defenders is often dangerous. The risks that they, their communities and their families face

are numerous and serious. They have included threats, violent attacks and killings; intimidation and harassment; the loss of jobs and livelihoods; slander and defamation; stigmatisation and de-legitimisation; criminalisation, imprisonment and forced exile; and disappearances, displacement and statelessness caused by the impunity of those who attack Human Rights Defenders.

The UK believes that all channels for Human Rights Defenders and civil society to engage with governments and those in power must continue to be open and safe. We must do all we can to allow them to live and work in safety, without fear of harassment or harm.

The UK has stated, and continues to maintain, that the UN must lead by example in protecting those who participate in its processes from reprisals. We have been particularly concerned by developments that women working in the fields of peacebuilding and security are being increasingly targeted for sharing their views. We will continue to work with Human Rights Defenders and civil society organisations on human rights, democracy, and rule of law issues around the world.

The UN Guiding Principles, based on the 'Protect, Respect and Remedy' framework, outlines that businesses have a duty to respect human rights abuses by third parties. It also makes clear that states have a responsibility to protect and not infringe the human rights of others, and to address any infringements in which they are involved. States must further take steps to ensure that there are effective judicial and nonjudicial remedies available to people whose human rights are abused. This framework overlaps neatly with the pillars that uphold the Aarhus Convention, and these requirements should be at the forefront of our minds following our election of the new Special Rapporteur for Environmental Defenders.

At this important moment in the history of the Aarhus Convention, we strongly reiterate our support for the new Special Rapporteur. We also thank Environmental Defenders for your courage and your unwavering determination in fighting for human rights, and for this, we support you and stand by you.

This brings me to the end of the UK's remarks. I would like to thank you for your attention in listening to our statement, and we look forward to hearing from the remaining speakers at this Round Table, as well as continuing the dialogue on this important issue. Thank you.