



Convention on Access to Information,  
Public Participation in Decision-making and  
Access to Justice in Environmental Matters  
(Aarhus Convention)

United Nations Economic Commission for Europe  
Palais des Nations, 8-14 avenue de la Paix  
CH - 1211 Geneva 10, Switzerland  
Email: [Aarhus-EnvDefenders@un.org](mailto:Aarhus-EnvDefenders@un.org)

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**Michel Forst**  
**UN Special Rapporteur on Environmental Defenders under the Aarhus Convention\***  
**Visit to Nicosia, Republic of Cyprus, 5 – 9 February 2024**  
**End of mission statement**

Today I concluded my visit to Nicosia, in my capacity as UN Special Rapporteur on Environmental Defenders under the Aarhus Convention. The visit took place from 5 – 9 February 2024, at the invitation of the Minister of Agriculture, Rural Development and Environment of Cyprus.

I would like to begin by expressing my sincere gratitude to the Government of Cyprus for this invitation to visit its country to raise awareness of public authorities and members of the public about the Aarhus Convention, its article 3 (8)<sup>1</sup>, and its rapid response mechanism to protect environmental defenders, established in the form of the mandate that I currently hold as Special Rapporteur. I would like to seize this opportunity to also thank sincerely the Minister of Agriculture, Rural Development and Environment, Dr. Maria Panayiotou, and the National Focal Points of the Aarhus Convention, for their remarkable support and cooperation prior to and throughout the visit.

During my visit I met with Ministers, government officials, members of Parliament, and with environmental defenders, including NGOs, grassroots organizations, activists, and journalists. I received information on the situation of environmental defenders as regard to their safety in their exercise of the rights to access information, participate in decision-making and access to justice in environmental matters. My observations in this statement are not a comprehensive assessment of the situation for environmental defenders in the country. They only reflect the information I received, as well as the concerns raised by those I met, during the limited timeframe of my visit to Cyprus.

During my meetings with Ministers and Government officials, I was informed that the strengthening of the implementation of the Aarhus Convention is a high priority for the country. I was also informed that public authorities consider access to justice as the most pressing issue in that regard, and are aiming at addressing it, including through awareness raising of, and the promotion of an enhanced cooperation between, ministries and other public bodies. I warmly welcome these efforts and encourage the Government to continue in this direction. In doing so, it is important that the Government focuses not only on access to justice, but also on effective access to information and public participation. In the course of my meetings with civil society, I learnt that environmental defenders consider the latter two issues similarly pressing, due to the gaps and challenges they identify in terms of implementation of the existing legal provisions guaranteeing these rights in Cyprus.

My visit allowed me to see how vibrant civil society is in Cyprus. I met many organizations involved in the protection of the environment and I saw how diverse they are. Generally speaking, environmental defenders reported being able to conduct their work. However, they also highlighted that it was not always in safe and enabling conditions. Many reported different forms of pressure – such as threats from employers to lose their job, or threats of lawsuits from developers – in reprisal for their mobilization against projects harmful to the environment. I was also informed about the recurring and very concerning issue of threats and physical attacks – including death threats and serious beating – against environmental organizations and their members who fight against bird poaching.

The invitation I received to conduct a country visit is a truly positive sign that indicates that Cyprus takes seriously its binding obligation under the Aarhus Convention to ensure that members of the public are not penalized, persecuted or harassed in any way for their involvement. I would like to acknowledge this very positive first step and I look forward to a continued cooperation and constructive dialogue with the Government of Cyprus, should I receive complaints in the future, to take the measures needed to ensure that environmental defenders can safely exercise their right to defend the environment, without fear of reprisals.

9 February 2024

**\*About the UN Special Rapporteur on Environmental Defenders  
under the Aarhus Convention**

The mandate of [Special Rapporteur on Environmental Defenders](#) was established under the Convention on Access to Information, Public Participation in Decision-making, and Access to Justice in Environmental Matters ([Aarhus Convention](#)).

In October 2021, the Meeting of the Parties to the Aarhus Convention adopted, by consensus, [Decision VII/9 establishing a rapid response mechanism for the protection of environmental defenders](#) in the form of a Special Rapporteur on Environmental Defenders, to deal with cases related to article 3 (8) of the Convention. Article 3 (8) requires that: *“Each Party shall ensure that persons exercising their rights in conformity with the provisions of this Convention shall not be penalized, persecuted or harassed in any way for their involvement.”*

The role of the Special Rapporteur on Environmental Defenders is to take measures to protect any person experiencing, or at imminent threat of experiencing, penalization, persecution, or harassment for seeking to exercise their rights under the Aarhus Convention.

The Special Rapporteur on Environmental Defenders is the first mechanism specifically safeguarding environmental defenders to be established within a legally binding framework either under the United Nations system or other intergovernmental structure.

Mr. Michel Forst was elected by consensus as the first Special Rapporteur on Environmental Defenders at the [third extraordinary session](#) of the Meeting of the Parties to the Aarhus Convention, on 24 June 2022.

The Aarhus Convention is an international instrument open for accession to any UN Member State. There are currently 47 Parties to the Aarhus Convention (the list is available [here](#)). The United Kingdom has been a Party to the Aarhus Convention since 2005.

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Special Rapporteur's [Website](#) – [X \(formerly Twitter\)](#) - [LinkedIn](#) - [Instagram](#) – [Facebook](#)  
Media enquiries: [aarhus-envdefenders@un.org](mailto:aarhus-envdefenders@un.org)

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<sup>1</sup> Article 3 (8) of the Aarhus Convention requires that *“Each Party shall ensure that persons exercising their rights in conformity with the provisions of this Convention shall not be penalized, persecuted or harassed in any way for their involvement”*.