

Claudia Fuentes Julio, Assistant Secretary-General for Human Rights:

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UN Warns of Reprisals Against Those Who Cooperate with It on Human Rights

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The United Nations has sounded the alarm over the targeting of individuals and organizations seeking to cooperate with it on human rights issues. It called for an end to the intimidation and reprisals they face and for accountability for violations and abuses.

A report issued by the Secretary-General on Wednesday documents cases involving human rights defenders, victims of human rights violations, journalists, lawyers and trade unionists targeted for cooperating, or seeking to cooperate, with the United Nations in 32 countries, including several Arab States.

The report aims to illustrate the situations faced by many other victims who refrain from reporting violations for fear of retaliation.

Claudia Fuentes Julio, Assistant Secretary-General for Human Rights, who leads the UN system's efforts to address reprisals, stated:

“No one should be forced to choose between their right to cooperate with the United Nations and their own safety or the safety of their family and community.”

She emphasized that safeguarding the organization's engagement with civil society “is not only essential to individuals' rights, but also necessary for the United Nations to fulfil its mandate and respond effectively to the needs of the people it serves.”

“It is deeply concerning and wholly unacceptable that young activists, women, environmental defenders and Indigenous Peoples continue to face heightened risks of being targeted simply for exercising their rights to engage with the United Nations and defend their communities, lands and environment.”

She called on States to protect those who cooperate with the United Nations, stressing that “safe and meaningful engagement with civil society is essential to advancing human rights worldwide.”

Documented Violations

The practices documented in the report included arbitrary detention, physical assaults, surveillance, threats, online harassment, restrictions on movement, passport confiscation and intimidation of family members.

The report highlighted the increasing use of digital technologies to monitor, intimidate and silence those seeking to engage with international human rights mechanisms. It stressed the urgent need to strengthen protection for people engaging with the United Nations in digital spaces.

The United Nations expressed concern over the continued misuse of legislation—including counter-terrorism, cybercrime and national security laws and regulations—to criminalize or further restrict essential civil society activities.

The Broader Chilling Effect

The report documented attempts to obstruct civil society participation in UN forums, as well as harassment of participants within UN premises themselves. It also noted attacks targeting independent human rights experts, including those mandated by the Human Rights Council, and “the broader chilling effect these practices may have on individuals and organizations seeking to cooperate with the United Nations.”

The Secretary-General’s report highlighted significant efforts by the UN system and Member States to address these issues, including measures to strengthen prevention, protection and accountability in relation to reprisals.

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