



DEFEND DEFENDERS

East and Horn of Africa Human Rights Defenders Project

UN Human Rights Council – 57th regular session

Item 2: General debate on the oral update by the High Commissioner

Oral statement

Delivered by: Estella Kabachwezi

Mr. President, Mr. High Commissioner,

As this Council completes its 18th cycle, the picture for human rights around the world is grim. In many places, **illiberal forces** seek to silence critical voices, undermine free expression and intellectual inquiry, and restrict the space citizens and civil society have to express themselves, protest, and associate free from undue interference.

Civic space is under attack in Africa. Restrictive laws and policies and abusive practices have a direct consequence: human rights defenders (HRDs), lawyers, journalists and other independent actors are at risk, particularly as, in several countries, elections approach.

Mr. High Commissioner, we call on you to enhance your Office's civic space-related work, including to identify early warning signs of crises.

Mr. President,

We reiterate our concerns over the **Sahel**, in particular **Mali** and **Burkina Faso**, and over unconstitutional changes of government across the continent.

In **Ethiopia**, increased pressure over HRDs, including in relation to their engagement with UN mechanisms, could be further compounded by plans, recently announced by the Prime Minister, to back-track on the 2019 CSO Proclamation.

In **Kenya**, we are concerned over impunity for violence against protesters, including in relation to unrest following the introduction of a tax bill, earlier this year. This is not the first episode where the right to peaceful assembly is severely violated. We call for impartial and thorough investigations into these incidents, as well as cases of enforced disappearances and extrajudicial killings.

Lastly, Mr. President, closed slates undermine **HRC elections**. For the Africa Group, this means that competition based on human rights criteria is eliminated and states that are unfit for membership get elected.

The Human Rights Council deserves better. Africa deserves better. Africans deserve better.

Thank you for your attention.