

## “Citizens can no longer be afraid to express themselves freely in their own countries”, Graça Machel

- Maputo remains the regional capital of human rights. The Human Rights Defenders Summit 2021 enters its second and day final today. Yesterday, the first day of the regional summit, the agenda was marked by interventions from high personalities and debates among Human Rights Defenders. Social activist Graça Machel argued that it makes no sense that citizens continue to be afraid to express themselves freely in their own countries.





Under the theme “Defending rights and protecting democracies in the face of rising inequalities and authoritarianism”, the two-day regional summit brings together HRDs and civil society organizations from Southern Africa, to assess the gains made and the risks and challenges faced by HRDs as civic space closes in the region.

The delegates at the summit are discussing creative ways of building regional solidarity with the aim of defending civic space and protecting the rights of the HRDs. “We elect people to serve and to create an environment that allows all citizens to have the opportunity for a dignified life,” said Graça Machel, warning that HRDs need to pay more attention to rural areas, where poverty levels are “alarming”.

“There is a lot of vulnerability in rural areas, poverty is extreme. We have to find a way to build a new social contract in the region. Citizens are the reason for the governments existence”, said Graça Machel, for whom “citizens cannot continue to be afraid to express themselves freely in their own countries”. The social activist explained that HRDs must work together with other civil society organizations, vulnerable groups, women, you-

ng people and even with political decision-makers. “Be prepared, your struggle will not be easy. Just as our liberators did, you can do it too”, Graça Machel.

The theme of the summit - “Defending rights and protecting democracies in the face of rising inequalities and authoritarianism” - reflects the reality experienced in the region, where HRDs are subject to various risks, such as persecution, arbitrary arrests and detentions, torture, forced disappearances, violent evictions, sexual assaults and repression in the online space.

During the year 2021, the pandemic of COVID-19 and restrictive measures enacted in several States continue to negatively impact the work of the HRDs who depend on open and free civic spaces to carry out their activism, in pursuit of social justice and democratic reforms. In the SADC region, for example, six (6) countries have declared states of emergency and in another six (6) states of disaster and/or public calamity have been declared.

In many States these measures restrict freedom of movement and make it difficult for HRDs to reach certain places safely. Activists working online are often subject to surveillance and security authorities use excessive force to enforce COVID-19 prevention

measures.

The possibilities of obtaining political asylum have significantly reduced, leaving many HRDs at risk of further persecution for their activism. COVID-19 has also worsened health conditions in prisons. The suspension of prison inspection visits in some jurisdictions due to the pandemic has severely affected access to justice.

Tiseke Kasambala of the regional organization Advancing Human Rights in Southern Africa (ARISA) described the working environment for civil society organizations dealing with human rights as precarious. “We have a large deficit of democracy and in the case of Mozambique, the impact has been compounded by the COVID-19 pandemic and the military instability in Cabo Delgado. The crises in Zimbabwe and Esatwini reveal the failure of the respective governments to defend their citizens. It is sad to witness the inaction of our region in the face of what is happening in Esatwini”.

One of the jobs that ARISA does is to monitor human rights violations in southern Africa. Tiseke Kasambala argues that the situation of journalism in the region is very worrying, giving as an example the arbitrary and illegal detentions of Mozambican journalists recor-



ded last September, especially in Nampula Province. "We should go to the streets to demand our rights. This did not need financial resources. As well as providing funds, ARISA also does this work of mobilizing HRDs."

But not everything is going badly in the region. For example, the free and transparent elections held in Malawi and Zambia show that there is some hope in the region. "In both countries there was peaceful transition

of power. That is very important," said Tiseke Kasambala. Who also highlighted the free elections in Malawi and Zambia as an example of "good things" happening in the region was Deprose Muchena from International Amnesty. "We are moving towards a moment when people are starting to say enough is enough."

Still, Deprose Muchena pointed to the continuous increase in socio-economic inequa-

lities in almost all countries in the region as one of the challenges for the realization of human rights. He therefore called for HRDs to work with state human rights organizations in finding better ways to protect the most vulnerable groups. "The solution is not to attack the state human rights organizations. We may not agree with their leadership, but we have to work with them. It can be a way to strengthen our work as HRDs."

## “It is not acceptable to kill people who are just demanding their rights,” Deprose Muchena, International Amnesty

The brutal and violent crackdown on pro-democracy protesters in Eswatini Kingdom was again referenced as an extreme case of closing civic space in the region. “Eight people have been killed and two thousand detained in Eswatini since June. It is not acceptable to kill people who are just demanding their rights,” criticized Deprose Muchena. The International Amnesty representative criticized the lack of solidarity between states in the region. “Our states are weak when it comes to defending other states. This has now become clear with the limitation of movement of people due to the discovery of the new variant of Covid-19. But when it comes to persecuting defenders, our states become strong.”

To this end, civil society organizations advocating for human rights must have pragmatic leadership. “In many organizations we have management, but the leadership is missing. We have to build leadership that survives beyond us,” said Deprose Muchena of International Amnesty. HRDs were also challenged to increase their interaction with the regional office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights. “Digital technology has revolutionized activism. I would like to encourage you to increase your interaction with the United Nations,” argued Abigail Noko of the OHCHR Regional Office.

For her part, the UN Special Rapporteur on the Situation of HRDs argued that local and international solidarity is one of the most sustainable ways that defenders have to work. “I am aware that human rights violations on the African continent are serious, so I would like HRDs in Africa to receive the same attention as other Defenders. But for this, I need to receive information on violations of their rights. I encourage you to send complaints about violations to my office”, urged the UN Special Rapporteur on the Situation of HRDs, Ms. Mary Lawlor.

From Malawi came the experience of mobilizing citizens to demand their rights in a peaceful and orderly manner. “The power we have comes from the people. If we have many people following our causes, governments will have more respect and even fear us. The demonstrations in Malawi moved over one million people,” said Grift Trapance of the Malawi Human Rights Defenders Coalition. Repression only takes place when the number of people taking to the streets to demand their rights is small. But the UN Rapporteur on the Rights to Peaceful Demonstration and Association, Clement Voule, war-



ned that it is the repression of demonstrators that generates violence.

The Ambassador of the Kingdom of the Netherlands in Mozambique, Heny de Vries, regretted the increase of authoritarianism in the world and in Africa in particular, noting that more than half of the world population lives in regimes that are not considered democratic. “The Covid-19 pandemic has increased restrictions on freedoms and rights in many countries. Freedom of expression has been greatly restricted. HRDs must ensure that the most vulnerable people have a voice,” said Heny de Vries.

The issue on the rise of authoritarianism in the world was also addressed by Siphosami Malunga of the Open Society Initiative for Southern Africa (OSISA). “Democracy is an intrinsic quality of human rights and vice versa. You cannot defend human rights where there is no democracy,” said Siphosami Malunga, for whom the coercive apparatus of the state has been captured by the liberating parties in the region.

“The state has also been captured by the economic elites who manipulate governments for their own benefit. The economic elites capture the state and the state provides them with contracts, they use the money they earn to fund the liberating parties so that they stay in power. It is a vicious cycle. In addition to exploiting natural resources, China supports the liberating parties with coercive means, sur-

veillance apparatus and military equipment to enable them to remain in power.”

The Human Rights Defenders Summit 2021 is organized by the Southern Africa Human Rights Defenders Network (Southern Defenders), in partnership with the Mozambican Network of Human Rights Defenders (RMD-DH), Advancing Human Rights in Southern Africa (ARISA), the Regional Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR - ROSA) and International Amnesty.

In addition to Human Rights Defenders and representatives of national, regional and international organizations, the Human Rights Defenders Summit 2021 will be attended by high personalities, including social activist Graça Machel, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights Defenders, Mary Lawlor, and the United Nations Rapporteur on the Rights to Peaceful Demonstration and Association, Clement Voule, the Ambassador of the Kingdom of the Netherlands in Mozambique, Heny de Vries, and the Vice-Minister of Information and Communication Technologies of the Republic of Namibia, Emma Theofelus.

The programme of the Human Rights Defenders Summit 2021 is available at: <https://redemmoz-defensoresdireitoshumanos.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/2021-Southern-Africa-Human-Rights-Defenders-Summit.pdf>



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