

ORGANISED BY SOUTHERN DEFENDERS AND RMDDH

Regional Summit of Human Rights Defenders starts today in Maputo

- From today until tomorrow, Maputo will be the capital of Southern African Human Rights Defenders. The Summit of Human Rights Defenders 2021 starts today at the Joaquim Chissano International Conference Centre, an event organized by the Southern Africa Human Rights Defenders Network (Southern Defenders), in partnership with the Mozambican Network of Human Rights Defenders (RMDDH), Advancing Human Rights in Southern Africa (ARISA), the Regional Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR - ROSA) and the Amnesty International.

The two-day regional summit brings together Human Rights Defenders and civil society organizations from Southern Africa to assess the gains made and the risks and challenges faced by Human Rights Defenders in the face of closing civic space in the region. The delegates to the summit will discuss creative ways of building regional solidarity with the aim of defending civic space and protecting the rights of Human Rights Defenders.

The theme of the summit - "Defending rights and protecting democracies in the face of rising inequalities and authoritarianism" - reflects the lived reality in the region, where Human Rights Defenders are subjected to various risks, such as harassment, arbitrary arrests and detentions, torture, enforced 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 Human Rights Defenders 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 Human Rights Defenders to reach certain places safely. Activists working *online* are often subject to surveillance and securi-



ty 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.

Changes in legislation have been used to restrict civic space, including constitutional amendments and cybercrime bills, which have an inhibiting effect on Human Rights Defenders. Persecution of HRDs by non-state actors, often linked to the extractive sector, persists in virtually every country in the region.

With the ever-increasing race for natural resources and the resulting conflicts, environmental rights defenders continue to be murdered, harassed, intimidated, criminalized and forced from their native lands by multinational companies. Therefore, a great deal of work needs to be done to ensure compliance with the Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights. According to the 2020 Frontline Report, Human Rights Defenders working on land and environmental issues are more at risk of being attacked and harassed compared to those working in other issue areas.

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-level personalities, including the Minister of Justice, Constitutional and Religious Affairs, Helena Mateus Kida, who will make the opening speech, 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, and the Ambassador of the Kingdom of the Netherlands in Mozambique, Henry de Vries.


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



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