

Mandates of the Special Rapporteur on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association; the Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression; the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders and the Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief

Ref.: AL GBR 2/2026
(Please use this reference in your reply)

21 January 2026

Excellency,

We have the honour to address you in our capacities as Special Rapporteur on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association and Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders, pursuant to Human Rights Council resolutions 59/4 and 52/4.

In this connection, we would like to bring to the attention of your Excellency's Government information we have received concerning **the regulations of peaceful assemblies in Northern Ireland**. We are concerned that onerous notice requirements, insurance obligations and restrictive administrative practices relating to public assemblies may impose disproportionate and undue limitations on the right to freedom of peaceful assembly, as protected under article 21 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), article 11 of the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) and the 1998 Human Rights Act. We are particularly concerned that the prevailing security-focused approach to the regulation of peaceful protests may result in a chilling effect on the legitimate exercise of human rights.

According to the information received:

Several local authorities in Northern Ireland do not appear to have clear, publicly accessible policies regarding protests on public land. In the absence of protest-related frameworks – which are not covered by the Local Government Act of 2014 – assemblies are regulated under “events” procedures designed for commercial gatherings such as music festivals.

In this context, we have been informed that the Belfast City Council requires organisers of certain protests to purchase public liability insurance of up to £10 million to cover potential injuries or road deaths. Individuals and grassroots organisations are reportedly unable to obtain the required finances. As a result, individuals and groups may be deterred from organising peaceful protests due to uncertainty regarding applicable requirements or concern about the potential consequences of non-compliance. Among the affected individuals and groups are civil society organisation and human rights defenders who organise protests to peacefully protect and promote human rights. Given that Belfast reportedly hosts a significant number of Northern Ireland's protests, these administrative and financial requirements may have a particularly pronounced deterrent effect on the exercise of the right to peaceful assembly.

Similar requirements are reportedly applied by other local authorities in Northern Ireland. Lisburn and Castlereagh City Council is reported to consider

protests as general “events” in the absence of a specific policy for assemblies, thereby requiring compliance with council health and safety assessments intended for commercial activities.

Reportedly, local by-laws in Armagh, Banbridge and Craigavon District Council governing events in public spaces, such as By-law 6 prohibits individuals from holding or participating in a public assembly, delivering a public speech, or addressing others in a public pleasure ground – including parks, public walks or open council spaces – without prior council consent.

We further note that Northern Ireland requires a 28-day notice period for planned marches. This is reported to be substantially longer than the six-day written notice requirement applicable in England and Wales. In addition, in certain locations, including parks in Belfast, organisers of protests are reportedly required to provide up to three months’ notice in order for a proposed assembly to be considered by a full council.

Additionally, it has been reported that peaceful assemblies, including those unrelated to sectarian identity or issues, are frequently regulated as if they were sectarian parades (related to Protestant / unionist / loyalist or Catholic / nationalist / republican identities). In this regard, organisers of moving protests are reportedly required to notify either the Parades Commission or the Police Service of Northern Ireland 28 days in advance, unless the authorities determine that it is not “reasonably practicable” to do so. The meaning and application of this exception are reported to be unclear.

Without prejudging the accuracy of these allegations and based on the information received, we would like to express our deep concern about the absence of clear, protest-specific policies, or alternatively the application of overly securitised regulatory frameworks, results in excessive restrictions on peaceful assemblies. Peaceful protests appear to be treated as presenting an inherent risk to public safety or public order. In this context, notification and financial requirements, together with uncertainty arising from unclear policies and the exercise of broad discretionary powers, may deter participation and give rise to concerns regarding arbitrary or discriminatory application.

Before presenting our specific observations and questions, we wish to recall to Your Excellency’s Government that the right to peaceful assembly and association is fundamental in its own right and is also essential for the realisation of other human rights that form the foundation of a democratic society.¹ States parties to the ICCPR are obliged “to respect and to ensure” the rights recognised therein. This includes a negative obligation not to interfere with peaceful assemblies by means such as blocking, prohibiting or disruption without justification, as well as a positive obligation to facilitate them. Such facilitation includes ensuring a clear legal and institutional framework and taking practical measures, such as redirecting traffic.²

¹ Human Rights Committee, *General Comment No. 37 on the right of peaceful assembly* (article 21), CCPR/C/GC/37 (2020), paras. 1 - 2.

² *Ibid.*, paras. 23 - 24.

In this regard, it has been emphasised that a functioning and transparent legal and decision-making system lies at the core of the duty to respect and ensure the right to peaceful assembly. Domestic legislation and regulatory frameworks must be clear, publicly accessible and consistent with international human rights standards, and States should ensure public awareness of the applicable rules.³ The reported confusion, absence of policy and inconsistent application of rules by local councils in Northern Ireland therefore raises serious concerns of non-compliance with these obligations.

We further recall that peaceful protests are protected under the ICCPR regardless of whether they take place in public or private spaces, and irrespective of whether they are stationary or mobile.⁴ Therefore, the reported requirement for organisers of moving protests to notify the Parades Commission or the Police Service of Northern Ireland 28 days in advance, subject to an unclear “reasonably practicable” exception, raises concerns regarding legal certainty and proportionality. This requirement warrants clarification to ensure conformity with international human rights obligations.

Furthermore, reported prohibitions on public speech or assembly in parks and other public spaces without council consent, such as those imposed in Armagh, Banbridge and Craigavon District Council, appear to interfere not only with the right to peaceful assembly but also with the right to freedom of expression. Such measures risk granting excessive discretion to local authorities and law enforcement, thereby increasing the risk of arbitrary restrictions. We recall that, in principle, it should be for protest organisers to determine the location of their assemblies, and that protests should be facilitated within the “sight and sound” of their intended audience, in light of their expressive purpose.⁵

We are further concerned by information indicating that protest organisers are required to obtain public liability insurance of up to £10 million as a condition for holding assemblies. We recall that requirements for organisers or participants to bear the costs of policing, security, cleaning, or related services are generally incompatible with article 21 of the ICCPR.⁶

We wish to remind Your Excellency that notification systems are intended for the purpose to enable authorities to facilitate assemblies and excessive requirements amounting to a request for permission to have a peaceful assembly undermine the fundamental nature of the right to peaceful assembly. We reiterate that notification systems must be clear, simple and proportionate to the nature and scale of the assembly.⁷ Therefore, the reported lack of clear protest policies, combined with 28-day notification requirements and onerous insurance obligations, raises serious concerns of incompatibility with international human rights standards.

In connection with the above alleged facts and concerns, please refer to the **Annex on Reference to international human rights law** attached to this letter which cites international human rights instruments and standards relevant to these allegations.

³ Ibid., para. 28.

⁴ Ibid., para. 6.

⁵ Ibid., para. 22.

⁶ Ibid., para. 64.

⁷ Ibid., paras. 70 - 71.

As it is our responsibility, under the mandates provided to us by the Human Rights Council, to seek to clarify all cases brought to our attention, we would be grateful for your observations on the following matters:

1. Please provide any additional information and/ or comments you have on the above-mentioned allegations.
2. Please indicate how laws and policies governing peaceful assemblies in Northern Ireland are clear, accessible and fully consistent with article 21 of the ICCPR.
3. Please explain the legal basis and justification for requiring prolonged notification periods, including 28-day and three-month notice requirements, and how these comply with the principles of necessity and proportionality.
4. Please clarify the rationale for treating peaceful protests as commercial events and for imposing public liability insurance requirements of up to £10 million on protest organisers.
5. Please provide information on the safeguards in place to prevent the arbitrary or discriminatory application of security-focused regulations, including by local councils, the Parades Commission, and law enforcement authorities.
6. Please indicate any measures taken or envisaged to review and reform existing policies and practices in order to better facilitate the exercise of the right to peaceful assembly in Northern Ireland.

This communication and any response received from your Excellency's Government will be made public via the communications reporting website within 60 days. They will also subsequently be made available in the usual report to be presented to the Human Rights Council.

Please accept, Excellency, the assurances of our highest consideration.

Gina Romero

Special Rapporteur on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association

Irene Khan

Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression

Mary Lawlor

Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders

Nazila Ghanea

Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief

Annex

Reference to international human rights law

In connection with above alleged facts and concerns, we would like to draw your attention to the relevant international norms and standards that apply to the issues raised by the situation above.

We wish to refer to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, to which the United Kingdom is a State party since May 1976. Article 21 of the Covenant protects the right of peaceful assembly. In its general comment 37, the Human Rights Committee has clarified that States must ensure a legal and institutional framework that enables individuals and groups to organise and participate in assemblies without undue interference. The Committee has emphasised that such frameworks must be clear, accessible and applied in a manner that does not create uncertainty or impose burdens that deter the exercise of the right. It has further underlined that administrative or practical requirements relating to assemblies must not be excessive or operate in a way that discourages participation.

We wish to remind Your Excellency's Government that states are obliged to permit and facilitate peaceful assemblies, provided they remain peaceful. For the purposes of article 21 of the ICCPR, "peaceful" should be understood as the absence of violence, namely physical force against persons or property that is likely to result in injury, death, or serious damage.⁸ Blanket bans or overly broad restrictions on peaceful assemblies are therefore presumed to be disproportionate and incompatible with international human rights law.⁹

Any restrictions on peaceful assemblies must meet the criteria of legality, necessity and proportionality in a democratic society and may be imposed only for the legitimate aims exhaustively listed in article 21 of the ICCPR: national security, public safety, public order (*ordre public*), the protection of public health or morals, or the protection of the rights and freedoms of others.¹⁰ Failure to comply with domestic notification requirements or to obtain insurance does not, in itself, constitute a legitimate ground for restricting peaceful assemblies. Moreover, "public order" must not be invoked in a vague manner to justify overly broad restrictions, as a certain degree of disruption must be tolerated as part of the right to protest.¹¹

We also recall the obligations arising under the European Convention on Human Rights, incorporated into domestic law through the Human Rights Act 1998. Article 11 of the Convention protects the right to freedom of peaceful assembly, and the European Court of Human Rights has consistently held that States must secure the effective enjoyment of this right. The Court has stressed that regulatory measures must not impose requirements that are disproportionate or that have the effect of discouraging individuals or groups from organising or taking part in assemblies, and that any

⁸ *Ibid.*, para. 15.

⁹ *Ibid.*, para. 38.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, para. 41.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, para. 44.

limitations must be applied with particular care in order to avoid undermining the essence of the right.

We further recall article 19 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which protects the right to freedom of opinion and expression which guarantees the freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, including through public advocacy and the communication of views in shared spaces. In general comment 34 (2011), the Human Rights Committee has underlined that States must ensure an environment in which individuals and groups are able to express themselves without undue interference, and that regulatory or administrative measures must not create uncertainty or deterrence that would inhibit the free exchange of ideas. Any restriction on expression must be clearly established by law and must meet the strict requirements of necessity and proportionality in relation to the aims permitted under article 19(3).

We also wish to recall the Declaration on the Right and Responsibility of Individuals, Groups and Organs of Society to Promote and Protect Universally Recognized Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms. The Declaration affirms the right of everyone, individually and in association with others, to promote and strive for the protection and realization of human rights at the national and international levels. It further recognises the right to form, join and participate in associations and groups, and to communicate with non-governmental and intergovernmental organisations. States are required to ensure that human rights defenders are able to carry out their legitimate activities without intimidation, hindrance or undue restriction. Measures that create obstacles for civil society actors to organise, participate in or support public advocacy activities may interfere with these rights and risk undermining the essential role played by human rights defenders in democratic societies.