

Mandates of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders and the Special Rapporteur on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association

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(Please use this reference in your reply)

25 February 2026

Excellency,

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

In this connection, we would like to bring to the attention of your Excellency's Government information we have received concerning **the deteriorating situation of human rights defenders in Sweden in recent years.**

According to the information received:

The situation of human rights defenders in Sweden has reportedly deteriorated in the past few years. In a context where security policies have been increasingly prioritized over human rights, civil society does not receive as much support as before and the civic space is shrinking.

Threats and hateful comments have intensified, in particular against women, ethnic and religious minorities and youth organizations. Those taking part in acts of civil disobedience or working on environmental issues have also been the target of death threats. Human rights defenders are subjected to threats and attacks mostly on social media or through private messages.

Human rights defenders have at times been silenced for their advocacy work or for expressing factual criticism. In some instances, engaging in human rights activities has negatively impacted people's private lives and careers.

The increasing administrative burdens and bureaucratic demands imposed on civil society organizations, along with a decrease in funding for those working on human rights, constitute further obstacles to the creation of a conducive environment for human rights defenders and their work.

Journalists

Journalists experienced restrictions on their right to freedom of expression and have been silenced, especially when reporting on human rights issues and topics related to the atrocities committed in Gaza. Some of those who attempted to write about this subject were reportedly stopped, or their publications were postponed under false pretexts. In a few cases, they were perceived as being "radical". This situation increased fear of speaking out amongst journalists and led some of them to censor themselves or even resign.

Climate issues and the situation of activists and human rights defender engaging in civil disobedience protests attract wide media attention, and several journalists have been covering these issues. However, they are often facing hate, threats and violence, and some of them have even been arrested while reporting on climate protests.

It has reportedly been challenging also to publish stories involving the forest industry and the impact of their action on the environment and Sámi indigenous peoples.

In some cases, those who tried to report on the silencing of journalists and the overall restrictions on freedom of expression and freedom of the media in Sweden were reportedly not allowed to look into this and publish their stories.

Student activists for Palestine

Across Sweden there have been many activists campaigning on the behalf of the Palestinian people, including students, staff and academics working at Stockholm University. Since November 2023, every Monday, they have organized and taken part in walkouts and, since October 2024, walk-ins at the university as a form of peaceful demonstrations. While at the beginning the walk-ins were allowed, students reported some cases in which police disrupted their activities using violence, including by grabbing and pushing them. Kettling tactics have also reportedly been used, and the entrances of the university have been blocked by policemen through 2025, especially during the spring semester where the police presence increased greatly.

Some students that led and took part in these protests have been arbitrarily detained, reportedly interrogated in police cars, and allegedly intimidated that they could no longer participate in the walk-ins. Student protesters using keffiyeh or other Palestinian symbols, as well as foreign students, have been among the ones that received a harsher treatment.

Minority rights defenders

The situation of minorities and those defending their rights is rapidly deteriorating in Sweden. There has been a rise in negative narratives around ethnic minorities and racist rhetorics, including in the media and by government representatives. This also had a negative impact on human rights defenders working on the protection and promotion of minority rights.

The increasingly limited funding allocated to human rights work disproportionately affect representatives of marginalized groups, hindering their advocacy work on minority rights. Reportedly, despite already being low, government grants to minority organizations have been further reduced over the past years. In addition, the involvement of minority groups in participation processes is decreasing, and their perspective is not listened to.

Representatives of the Tornedalian, Kvens, and Lantalaiget ethnic minority and defenders of their rights are reportedly excluded from decision-making

processes, including regarding issues affecting them, and rendered invisible in society. They often lack support from the general public, which, coupled with a sense of being ignored, neglected and marginalised, makes it difficult for them to promote their rights and perpetuate their culture and tradition. The inadequate human and financial resources they have at their disposal for their advocacy work further complicate their situation. As they are faced with heavy workload, the poor capacity of Tornedalian minority organizations risks affecting the mental health and wellbeing of their representatives.

Defenders of the rights of Roma people

Roma human rights defenders are reportedly in a precarious situation. Stigmatisation of people of Roma ethnicity by the media and political figures is widespread, with negative narratives particularly affecting Roma women human rights defenders and organizations. They are often the target of racist or misogynist remarks, and their advocacy is sometimes perceived as a “threat” rather than a valuable contribution. In addition, their credibility is questioned, their motives seen with suspicion and their expertise not taken into account, which often discourages Roma women from engaging in advocacy and participating to public life.

Defenders of the rights of religious minorities

Muslim and Jewish organizations have been particularly affected by the increase in hate speech and threats against human rights defenders. Those advocating for non-discrimination are labelled as “extremists”. Muslim organizations are often portrayed as “non-democratic”, “terrorist” and “Islamist”, which contributed to undermining their legitimacy and credibility in the eyes of the general public.

Muslim organizations also faced restrictions on their right to freedom of association. For example, in some cases, they reportedly lost public funding, which forced them to stop their activities or shut down.

Defenders of the rights of persons with disabilities

Limitations to the right to participate in public affairs and to the right to freedom of expression of persons with disabilities and defenders of their rights have been reported. Representatives of local associations, for example, sometimes refrain from criticizing the authorities because they fear that they or their relatives might lose access to financial assistance or support services. Restricted access to these services can result in obstacles to their public participation and to the ability to contribute to decision-making processes on matters that affect them.

LGBTI+ rights defenders

Threats, harassment, and violence against LGBTI+ people have reportedly increased compared to previous years, and advocating for LGBTI+ rights is more difficult today than before. This reflects the rise in anti-gender movements, which makes it harder for human rights defenders working on

LGBTI+ issues to organize and do their work. They are targeted mostly on social media or by email, and for security reasons they sometimes need to hold their events in hidden locations.

Environmental rights defenders

Environmental rights defenders and climate activists that engage in protests and acts of civil disobedience have been facing repression. Some of them have reportedly been pressured into leaving their jobs, their activism has been questioned in job interviews, or they have faced negative consequences in the workplace because of their human rights activism.

In addition, politicians tried to undermine the role and activities of climate defenders, including by stating that “terrorist laws” should be used against them and portraying them as a “threat to democracy and democratic principles”. They are often seen as “potential terrorists” or “security risks” and labelled as “criminals” or “saboteurs”. Hateful rhetoric and threats are also prevalent. Some political figures and segments of society are increasingly hostile to climate activism.

Environmental rights defenders have also faced restrictions to their right to freedom of peaceful assembly. Participating in civil disobedience protests increasingly exposes them to the risk of prosecution. Activists have reportedly been prosecuted for severe offences, such as ‘sabotage’ for acts that previously would have been prosecuted only as misdemeanours. While some protesters have been acquitted, others have been convicted and sentenced. Even if sentences are later overturned, the criminalization of environmental rights defenders puts them under extreme pressure and, if used as a threat, criminal sanctions risk having a chilling effect on civil society and their peaceful activism.

While we do not wish to prejudge the accuracy of these allegations, we would like to express concern about the deteriorating situation of human rights defenders in Sweden. In particular, we are concerned about the reported threats, hate speech, stigmatization and criminalization of human rights defenders, as well as the restrictions to their rights to freedom of expression and freedom of peaceful assembly and association. Human rights defenders in Sweden, including journalists reporting on human rights issues, appear to be primarily targeted as a result of their human rights work, with those working the rights of minority groups, environmental issues, the rights of LGBTI+ people and of persons with disabilities, as well as those advocating for the rights of Palestinian people, being particularly exposed to risks.

We urge your Excellency’s Government to undertake measures to counter these trends and tackle the ongoing deterioration of the situation of human rights defenders in Sweden, ensuring that they can operate in a safe and enabling environment without fear of reprisals or retaliation.

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.

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 comment(s) you may have on the above-mentioned allegations.
2. Please provide information on the measures that your Excellency's Government has undertaken or intends to undertake to ensure that civil society organizations and human rights defenders representing or working for the rights of different groups are included in decision-making processes and receive enough funding and support to effectively carry out their human rights work.
3. Please provide information on the measures that your Excellency's Government has undertaken or intends to undertake to counter smear campaigns and stigmatization of human rights defenders in Sweden.
4. Please provide information on measures adopted by your Excellency's Government to ensure a safe and enabling environment for human rights defenders in Sweden to carry out their legitimate and peaceful human rights activities and exercise their rights without fear of retaliation, harassment or intimidation and free from any hindrance.
5. Please provide information on measure and policies adopted by your Excellency's Government to safeguard the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and association for human rights defenders, namely:
 - a) measures intended to mitigate administrative burdens and bureaucratic demands on civil society organizations;
 - b) measures aimed at safeguarding adequate funding for their activities;
 - c) measures counteracting the chilling effect on the exercise of these rights, particularly by environmental rights defenders, arising from increased stigmatization and criminalization.

This communication, and any response received from your Excellency's Government, will be made public via the communications reporting [website](#) at the 60 days mark. Should Your Excellency's Government respond within 60 days, both the communication and the response, may be published before the 60 days mark. The communications and responses will also be made available in the subsequent periodic report to be presented to the Human Rights Council.

While awaiting a reply, we urge that all necessary interim measures be taken to halt the alleged violations and prevent their re-occurrence and in the event that the investigations support or suggest the allegations to be correct, to ensure the accountability of any person(s) responsible for the alleged violations.

We may publicly express our concerns in the near future as, in our view, the information upon which the press release will be based is sufficiently reliable to indicate a matter warranting immediate attention. We also believe that the wider public should be alerted to the potential implications of the above-mentioned allegations. The press release will indicate that we have been in contact with your Excellency's Government's to clarify the issue/s in question.

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

Mary Lawlor

Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders

Gina Romero

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

Annex

Reference to international human rights law

In connection with above alleged facts and concerns, we would like to refer your Excellency's Government to the relevant international norms and standards that are applicable to the issues brought forth by the situation described.

In this regard, we remind your Excellency's Government of Sweden's obligations under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), ratified by Sweden on 6 December 1971. In particular, we wish to refer to article 19 of the ICCPR, which guarantees the right to freedom of opinion and the right to freedom of expression.

Article 19 of the ICCPR guarantees the right to freedom of opinion and the right to freedom of expression, which includes the right "to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, either orally, in writing or in print, in the form of art, or through any other media". This right applies online as well as offline, protects the freedom of the press as one of its core elements and includes not only the exchange of information that is favourable, but also that which may criticize, shock, or offend. In its general comment No. 34, the Human Rights Committee stated that States parties to the ICCPR are required to guarantee the right to freedom of expression, including "political discourse, commentary on one's own and on public affairs, canvassing, discussion of human rights, journalism, cultural and artistic expression, teaching, and religious discourse" (CCPR/C/GC/34, para. 11).

The Committee further asserts that there is a duty of States to put in place effective measures to protect against attacks aimed at silencing those exercising their right to freedom of expression (para. 23). Recognizing how journalists and persons who engage in the gathering and analysis of information on the human rights situation and who publish human rights-related reports, including judges and lawyers, are frequently subjected to threats, intimidation and attacks because of their activities, the Committee stresses that "all such attacks should be vigorously investigated in a timely fashion, and the perpetrators prosecuted, and the victims, or, in the case of killings, their representatives, be in receipt of appropriate forms of redress" (para. 23).

Any restriction on the right to freedom of expression must be compatible with the requirements set out in article 19(3) ICCPR. Under these requirements, restrictions must (i) be provided by law; (ii) pursue one of the legitimate aims for restriction, which are the respect of the rights or reputations of others and the protection of national security or of public order (*ordre public*), or of public health or morals; and (iii) be necessary and proportionate for those objectives. The State has the burden of proof to demonstrate that any such restrictions are compatible with the Covenant, and restrictions must always be "the least intrusive instrument among those which might achieve their protective function" (CCPR/C/GC/34, para. 34). In this context, we underscore that the Human Rights Committee has found that "It is not compatible with article 19(3), for instance, to invoke such laws to suppress or withhold from the public information of legitimate public interest that does not harm national security or to

prosecute journalists, researchers, environmental activists, human rights defenders, or others, for having disseminated such information.” (CCPR/C/GC/34 para. 30).

Additionally, we remind your Excellency’s Government of Sweden’s obligations under articles 21 and 22 ICCPR, stipulating the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and to association.

States not only have a negative obligation to abstain from unduly interfering with the rights of peaceful assembly and of association but also have a positive obligation to facilitate and protect these rights in accordance with international human rights standards (A/HRC/17/27, para. 66; and A/HRC/29/25/Add.1). This means ensuring that the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association are enjoyed by everyone, without discrimination on the basis of race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status (article 2(1) of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights) (see also ICCPR, art. 26, A/HRC/41/41, para. 13).

States furthermore have the responsibility under international human rights law to respect, protect and facilitate the right to freedom to access resources by civil society organizations (A/HRC/53/38/Add.4, para. 17).

These obligations must be implemented in a nondiscriminatory manner, with particular attention to the rights and needs of individuals from groups or populations at higher risk of facing discrimination and marginalization, including women; youth; indigenous peoples, persons with disabilities, persons belonging to minority groups or groups at risk, including those victims of discrimination because of their sexual orientation and gender identity, and non-nationals, as well as activists advocating for women’s and sexual and reproductive rights and facing discrimination for their political views, including opposition to their government. (A/HRC/53/38/Add.4, para. 21)

With regard to administrative burdens and funding constraints, we wish to remind your Excellency’s Government that the former Special Rapporteur on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association in a report called upon States “[t]o ensure that associations – registered and unregistered – can seek, receive and use funding and other resources from natural and legal persons, whether domestic, foreign or international, without prior authorization or other undue impediments, including from individuals; associations, foundations or other civil society organizations; foreign Governments and aid agencies; the private sector; the United Nations and other entities” (A/HRC/23/39, para. 82(b)). He also called upon States to “recognize that undue restrictions to funding, including percentage limits, is a violation of the right to freedom of association and of other human rights instruments, including the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights” (A/HRC/23/39, para. 82(c)), and to “recognize that regulatory measures which compel recipients of foreign funding to adopt negative labels constitute undue impediments on the right to seek, receive and use funding” (A/HRC/23/39, para. 82(d)).

We would like to recall that the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders noted in his report to the Human Rights Council (A/64/226) that the only legal grounds upon which an interference with the freedom of association that is prescribed by law can be justified is if it meets the test as outlined by article 22,

paragraph 2 of the ICCPR. These provisions require the interference in question to be pursuant to ‘legitimate aims’, such as in the interests of national security or public safety; public order (ordre public); the protection of public health or morals, or the protection of rights and freedoms of others. Without such a legitimate aim, interference is rendered contrary to international human rights law, and in the context of the activities of NGOs, the Special Rapporteur has argued that “difficulties in the formation and registration of human rights associations; criminal sanctions for unregistered activities; government interference, supervision and monitoring of NGO activities; and difficulties in accessing funding may restrict the right to freedom of association and therefore must reach the very high threshold under article 22, paragraph 2, of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights in order to be admissible.” (A/64/226, para. 58.)

As concerns the repression of environmental rights defenders and climate activists, we would like to bring to your Excellency’s Government’s attention that in his report to the General Assembly on the exercise of the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association as essential to advancing climate justice, the former Special Rapporteur called on States to:

- “Adopt all necessary measures to ensure that individuals, organizations, communities and indigenous people exercising their rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association in support of climate justice are not subjected to attacks, harassment, threats and intimidation, including (...) refraining from issuing official and unofficial statements stigmatizing civil society groups engaged in climate justice” (A/HRC/76/222, para. 90(b)).
- “Ensure that law and practice illegitimately restricting the place where and manner in which protests may take place, including laws criminalizing protests at or near business worksites as well as blanket bans on particular forms of protest, are reformed, in order to ensure full access to and enjoyment of the right to freedom of peaceful assembly. Among other things, States should amend laws criminalizing road blocking as a form of peaceful protest. States should recognize and provide space for civil disobedience and non-violent direct-action campaigns and ensure that any restriction complies with legality, necessity and proportionality requirements” (A/HRC/76/222, para. 90(d)).
- “Ensure that civil society and communities can meaningfully participate in all climate and just-transition policy development and implementation at all levels of decision-making” (A/HRC/76/222, para. 90(i)).

In this sense, we wish to also recall that the Special Rapporteur has frequently repeated that a certain level of disruption of ordinary life, including disruption of traffic or inconveniences to which business activities are subjected, must be tolerated if the right to freedom of peaceful assembly is not to be deprived of meaning. The Special Rapporteur on Environmental Defenders under the Aarhus Convention, Michel Forst has also called on States to refrain from using the “increase of environmental civil disobedience as a pretext to restrict the civic space and the exercise of fundamental

freedoms” and called on law enforcement and courts to “cease the use of measures designed for counterterrorism and organized crime against environmental defenders” (para. 59).

“Silencing social movements and civil society, including those working on climate justice further exacerbate grievances that are root causes of violence in the community and conflicts. Furthermore, closing the space for participation, can exacerbate hatred, divisions, polarisation, inequalities, and push people towards extremism, and recourse to violent resistance” (para. 70).

“If climate commitments and pledges are to be met, States must respect and protect a participatory and inclusive agenda and protect the rights of environmental activists to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association. By collaborating with trade unions and environmental activists, States can ensure just transitions and inclusive decision-making processes that benefit all and leave no one behind” (para. 92).

We would like to refer to the fundamental principles set forth in 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, also known as the UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders. In particular, we would like to refer to articles 1 and 2 of the Declaration, which state that everyone has the right to promote and to strive for the protection and realization of human rights and fundamental freedoms at the national and international levels and that each State has a prime responsibility and duty to protect, promote and implement all human rights and fundamental freedoms. We would further wish to refer to the following articles of the declaration:

- Article 5(a), which provides that everyone has the right to meet or assemble peacefully.
- Article 5(b), which provides that everyone has the right to form, join and participate in non-governmental organizations, associations or groups.
- Article 6(b), which states that everyone has the right to freely to publish, impart or disseminate to others views, information and knowledge on all human rights and fundamental freedoms.
- Article 6(c), which states that everyone has the right, individually or in association with others, to study, discuss, form and hold opinions on the observance in law and in practice of all human rights and fundamental freedoms and to draw public attention to these matters.
- Article 12(2), holding that States shall take all necessary measures to ensure the protection by the competent authorities of everyone, individually and in association with others, against any violence, threats, retaliation, de facto or de jure adverse discrimination, pressure or any other arbitrary action as a consequence of their legitimate exercise of the rights referred to in the declaration.

- Article 13, providing that everyone has the right, individually and in association with others, to solicit, receive and utilize resources for the express purpose of promoting and protecting human rights and fundamental freedoms through peaceful means.

- Article 17, providing that “[i]n the exercise of the rights and freedoms referred to in the present Declaration, everyone, acting individually and in association with others, shall be subject only to such limitations as are in accordance with applicable international obligations and are determined by law solely for the purpose of securing due recognition and respect for the rights and freedoms of others and of meeting the just requirements of morality, public order and the general welfare in a democratic society”.