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**Statement by  
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**SPECIAL RAPPORTEUR ON THE SITUATION OF  
HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS**

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**Chair,**  
**Excellencies,**  
**Distinguished delegates,**

Good Afternoon. It is a great honour to present my first report to you.

Human rights defenders, as I have known them over so many years, are at once ordinary and extraordinary individuals, simultaneously engaged in the defence of human rights and the dance of their own lives.

Working peacefully to build humane and just societies is in their lifeblood. Despite great personal risk, they continue to work non-violently for the rights of others every single day. Often, they do not know when they get up in the morning if they will still be alive that night.

Since I took up the mandate in May, in this year of Covid, I have talked online to hundreds of human rights defenders. I have heard first-hand how the pandemic has been used across the world as an excuse to further attack them, and many defenders, including medics, have been targeted for telling the truth about the virus and its consequences.

When they are threatened, or their families are threatened, new travel restrictions mean they are unable to move to a safer area. Some defenders confined to their homes now feel like sitting targets.

On every continent defenders are in danger and continue - year after year - to be killed in their hundreds for their peaceful human rights work. These murders are not random acts of violence and are not inevitable. They are the deliberate targeting of those defending human rights.

With your help these killings can be stopped.

Governments must not stand silently by, nor can they afford to. The main responsibility to stop these killings remains with governments, and we need your leadership.

We know that corruption and impunity are drivers of these attacks. We also know that interventions can be made, after a death threat is received by a human rights defender, to protect them before it is too late. Too often these threats are ignored by governments, who fail in their duty to protect their people.

The mandate of the Special Rapporteur for human rights defenders is a people-centred mandate and stopping the killings of human rights defenders is its core priority. It will be the subject of my next report to the Human Rights Council in March 2021.

My mandate will focus on the most marginalised and vulnerable defenders exposed to these and other violent attacks. We must not forget that it is not the defence of human rights that makes these brave individuals vulnerable – it is the inaction of those whose duty it is to protect them.

This includes women defenders, those defending the rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex persons, defenders who are themselves children, and defenders with disabilities.

My mandate will also concentrate on defenders working on the rights of refugees and migrants, those working on the climate crisis, on land rights, on indigenous people's rights, on environmental rights, and defenders working in isolated and remote areas.

Human rights defenders serving long terms in prison, who fade from the sight as the years go by, will not be forgotten by this mandate, and I will focus on reprisals against defenders who cooperate with the United Nations system.

The mandate will also address the impact of businesses and the international financial institutions on the work of defenders. We know that many defenders are killed every year after protesting about business projects threatening environmental, land, or indigenous peoples' rights. I will engage with businesses and IFIs to discuss how they can meet their responsibilities.

I encourage all governments to implement policies and practices to prevent attacks on human rights defenders. Governments have a vital role to play in promoting the positive contribution made to society by defenders. Personally, I really would like to engage with governments and recognize any positive efforts made, and I welcome the engagement of all governments with this mandate throughout my term.

Esteemed colleagues, friends, I will conclude by saying we need to urgently work together to protect human rights defenders. The world is changing fast, and Covid has shown us that an invisible enemy can creep up unannounced, suddenly endangering us all.

The pandemic is a frightening, global alarm, reminding us of our fragility and our interdependence. We need the voices of human rights defenders to be heard, and to be central in building back new and better societies during and after the pandemic.

Many lives could have been saved worldwide and the damage to communities and economies slowed or averted if defenders exposing the truth about the pandemic and its consequences had been listened to. Silencing human rights defenders is a danger to us all and is in all our interests to protect them and their work.

All of us here want to love and be loved, and to keep our loved ones safe from harm and free from want in societies where we live as equals. Through my work I have seen and heard of terrible cruelties and injustice, but I still believe in the fundamental goodness of people. I have seen examples of diplomats, public servants and other government officials embodying true qualities of compassion, justice, and heroic conduct.

The virus is forceful reminder that we are all on the same side against a common threat. Human rights defenders are not our enemies. They are ordinary people doing extraordinary things to make all our lives better. Let us stand with them, work with them, and protect them.

I believe we were all put here to improve our shared world and it is my hope, in these strange times, that we pledge to work together to find ways to protect these unique indomitable individuals, as the right and honorable thing to do.

In my country, there is an old saying, passed down through generations that suffered the injustice of colonialism, famine, conflict and human rights abuses “*Ar scáth a chéile a mhaireann na daoine,*” – meaning “*It is in the shelter of each other that the people live.*”

Thank you.