

**Statement at the 50th Session of The United Nations Human Rights Council
Item : UPR on the Situation of Human Rights Defenders in Zimbabwe
Speaker : ILIFF, Fiona**

M. President,

This is a joint statement¹.

We welcome Zimbabwe's active participation in the Universal Periodic Review process and acceptance of 168 recommendations out of 264, including several addressing the situation of human rights defenders..

Nonetheless, we are concerned by the shrinking civic and democratic space in the country, as Zimbabwe prepares for general elections in 2023. Before and after the March 2022 by-elections, there has been an alarming rise in political violence and police brutality.

Peaceful protests and assemblies of human rights defenders, civil society organisations and opposition political activists are being banned, and criminalised, through selective abuse of restrictive provisions in the Maintenance of Peace and Order Act and Criminal Law (Codification and Reform) Act. Human rights defenders are being subjected to arbitrary arrests, malicious prosecutions and lengthy pre-trial detention in inhuman conditions in maximum security prisons.

NGOs are facing ever increasing administrative crackdowns and hate speech by the authorities. The Private Voluntary Organisations Amendment Bill, 2021, currently before Parliament, poses a grave threat to the operations of NGOs. It imposes harsh criminal penalties for unauthorised charitable fundraising and for unregistered organisations conducting charitable activities. Upon the passing of the Bill, NGOs operating lawfully as trusts and associations will be rendered unlawful as there are no transitional provisions protecting their status pending their registration under the Act. It will criminalise NGOs for "political" activities, and give the executive excessive powers to interfere in NGOs' operations, including to suspend their executive committees and replace them.

Therefore, we call on Zimbabwe to:

- Cease restrictions on peaceful protests and assemblies.
- Repeal restrictive criminal provisions violating freedom of expression, assembly and association.
- Cease issuing denigrating and threatening statements against human rights defenders, NGOs and victims of rights violations.
- Abandon or amend the Private Voluntary Organisations Amendment Bill, 2021 to protect civic space.

I thank you.

¹ The International Service for Human Rights and Zimbabwe Lawyers for Human Rights