



HUMAN RIGHTS HOUSE NETWORK

Baroness Catherine Ashton
High Representative for Foreign Affairs & Security Policy
European External Action Service
1046 Brussels
Belgium

Fax: +32 295 19 15

Email: EEAS-PRESS@eeas.europa.eu

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Worrisome pressure by the European Union to further reduce the budget of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights

Madam Vice-President of the European Commission,

We, the undersigned members and partners of the Human Rights House Network (HRHN), are extremely worried to learn that the European Union is aiming at further reducing the ordinary budget of the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights at the on going negotiations at the United Nations General Assembly. We call upon the European Union to support the work of the Office, including by aiming at increasing its ordinary budget as a way to strengthen the impact of its work and cooperation by all States.

Calls for a so-called “across the board” reduction of budgets of the United Nations and its agencies resulted in a proposed programme budget for the biennium 2014-2015 decreasing the ordinary budget of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) by a net 4.8%. The promotion and protection of human rights represents only 3% of the overall UN budget. Many organisations already expressed their concern on this matter, including a coalition of international NGOs addressing it in a joint letter on 19 November 2013.¹

In discussions at the 68th session of the UN General Assembly, it appears that the European Union is requesting an even sharper reduction in OHCHR’s budget.

Since its establishment 20 years ago, OHCHR has faced increasing requests, including the duty to mainstream human rights throughout the UN system. We believe this mission is core to the existence of the Office. Its duties also include administrative tasks related to the facilitation of the work of human rights treaty bodies, Human Rights Council special procedures and the secretariat of the Council itself. To date, the latter must draw upon extra-budgetary resources to fund its work to up to nearly 27% of its expenses (only 73% funded by the ordinary budget), whilst treaty bodies are funded

¹ Joint letter initiated by the International Service for Human Rights, “States must act to protect UN human rights programme from funding deficit”, 19 November 2013, available at <http://www.ishr.ch/news/states-must-act-protect-un-human-rights-programme-funding-deficit>.

by 40% of voluntary contributions (60% by the ordinary budget) and special procedures are funded up to 44% by voluntary contributions (56% of its expenses covered by the ordinary budget).²

We indeed strongly believe that, as a principle, the regular budget of OHCHR should cover all costs of activities mandated by the Human Rights Council and other relevant bodies, including the work of the Human Rights Council itself, the work of the treaty bodies and OHCHR's field missions, as way of improving transparency of the funding of OHCHR's activities and prioritisation. By reducing OHCHR's ordinary budget, UN member States increase OHCHR's dependence on voluntary contributions. With further reduction requests, the European Union is harming its own member States, as they are in their national capacities the main voluntary contributors to OHCHR alongside *inter alia* Norway and Switzerland, and will be called upon to increase their contribution to OHCHR. Hence also reducing the transparency of OHCHR's funding and paving the way for further critics against its independence and legitimacy by States on which the Office keeps a close eye.

Whilst we are well aware of the current budgetary restraints of the United Nations itself and its member States, a net "across the board" reduction of costs also comes at a time at which the Office is undergoing a process of planning its further work and prioritising. It is indeed trying to address the financial limitations, which however cannot happen overnight, as for any large-scale administration.

We also believe that a reform of OHCHR is a way of reducing its costs. We believe OHCHR needs to look into its work-methods aiming at reducing waste. OHCHR has repeatedly expressed it is working on identifying priorities and focusing on areas of work in which it has a proven record of impact. Much is to be done to ensure more independence for special procedure mandate holders, more active field offices, and a more open OHCHR towards civil society in Geneva as well as in its field offices. This however cannot be achieved by pressure based on its funding, as the European Union is doing, and this reform cannot compensate the increasing demands faced by OHCHR.

Keeping in mind that within the overall UN budget, the share allocated to the promotion and protection of human rights represents approximately 3%, **the intent to reduce OHCHR's budget is a signal in the wrong direction. Soon the Human Rights Council will celebrate its 10 years of existence - we believe that all States and group of States aiming at promoting human rights should ambition to raise that share to at least 10% to celebrate the 10 years of existence of the Council**, which will be made impossible if the European Union continues to pressure for more and more "across the board" cuts in the UN's human rights budget.

20 years after the Office was established, does the European Union really want to a force contributing to undermining the sustainability of OHCHR, hence weakening the voice for human rights within the UN system?

Sincerely,

Azerbaijan Human Rights House (on behalf of the following NGOs):

- Association for Protection of Womens' Rights
- Azerbaijan Lawyers Association
- Human Rights Center of Azerbaijan
- Institute for Peace and Democracy
- Legal Education Society
- Women's Association for Rational Development
- Media Rights Institute
- Public Union of Democracy and Human Rights Resource Centre
- Society for Humanitarian Research

² See the intervention made by Turkey in the name of 42 States at the 22nd session of the Human Rights Council, on 28 February 2013.

Barys Zvozkau Belarusian Human Rights House in exile, Vilnius

Human Rights House Belgrade (on behalf of the following NGOs):

- Belgrade Centre for Human Rights
- Lawyers' Committee for Human Rights
- Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in Serbia
- Policy Center

Human Rights House Kiev (on behalf of the following NGOs):

- Association of Ukrainian Human Rights Monitors on Law Enforcement (Association UMDPL)
- Center for Civil Liberties
- Human Rights Information Center

Human Rights House Tbilisi (on behalf of the following NGOs):

- Article 42 of the Constitution
- Caucasian Centre for Human Rights and Conflict Studies
- Georgian Centre for Psychosocial and Medical Rehabilitation of Torture Victims
- Human Rights Centre
- Media Centre
- Union Sapari – Family without Violence

Human Rights House Oslo (on behalf of the following NGOs):

- Human Rights House Foundation (HRHF)
- Health and Human Rights Info
- Norwegian Helsinki Committee

Human Rights House Voronezh (on behalf of the following NGOs):

- Charitable Foundation
- Civic Initiatives Development Centre
- Confederation of Free Labor
- For Ecological and Social Justice
- Free University
- Golos
- Interregional Trade Union of Literary Men
- Lawyers for labor rights
- Memorial
- Ms. Olga Gnezdilova
- Soldiers Mothers of Russia
- Voronezh Journalist Club
- Voronezh-Chernozemie
- Youth Human Rights Movement

Human Rights House Yerevan (on behalf of the following NGOs):

- Armenian Helsinki Association
- Helsinki Citizens' Assembly – Vanadzor
- Jurists against Torture
- Guaranteeing Equal Opportunities
- Shahkhatun
- Socioscope
- Women's Resource Center

Human Rights House Zagreb (on behalf of the following NGOs):

- Association for Promotion of Equal Opportunities for People with Disabilities
- B.a.B.e. – Be active, Be emancipated
- Centre for Peace Studies
- Documenta – Centre for Dealing with the Past

- GOLJP - Civic Committee for Human Rights
- Svitanje - Association for Protection and Promotion of Mental Health

Russian Research Centre for Human Rights (on behalf of the following NGOs):

- Human Rights Network Group
- Independent Psychiatric Association of Russia
- Moscow Centre for Prison Reform
- Moscow Helsinki Group
- Mother's Right Foundation
- Non-violence International
- Right of the Child
- Right to Live and Have Civil Dignity
- Social Partnership Foundation Union of the Committees of Soldiers' Mothers of Russia

Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights, Poland

Human Rights Club, Azerbaijan

Index on Censorship, United Kingdom

Rafto Foundation, Norway

About the Human Rights House Network (www.humanrightshouse.org)

The Human Rights House Network (HRHN) unites 87 human rights NGOs joining forces in 18 independent Human Rights Houses in 16 countries in Western Balkans, Eastern Europe and South Caucasus, East and Horn of Africa, and Western Europe. HRHN's mandate is to protect, empower and support human rights organisations locally and unite them in an international network of Human Rights Houses.

The Human Rights House Foundation (HRHF), based in Oslo (Norway) with an office in Geneva (Switzerland), is HRHN's secretariat. HRHF is international partner of the South Caucasus Network of Human Rights Defenders and the emerging Balkan Network of Human Rights Defenders.

HRHF has consultative status with the United Nations and HRHN has participatory status with the Council of Europe.