

**CHAIRPERSON'S REPORT ON THE 13TH INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE OF NATIONAL HUMAN RIGHTS INSTITUTIONS (NHRIS) ON CIVIL SPACE AND HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS HELD FROM 10 TO 12 OCTOBER 2018 IN MARRAKECH, MOROCCO**

It is lamentable that the African continent does not have airline flight interconnections facilitating easy travel of its citizens within the continent. Sub-Saharan nationals have to fly to European destinations first to connect to North African countries and vice versa. It is specifically because of this syndrome that my business trip to Marrakech, Morocco via Dubai and Paris is one to forget as it was harrowing and too costly on account of my loss of \$USD1150.00 which could have been nipped from my purse by a Royal Air Maroc hostess from Paris to Marrakech or in the hotel soon after my checking-in.

The conference proper kicked off at 9 am, 10 October with opening remarks from the Chairperson of the Morocco National Human Rights Council (CNDA), the four NHRI Regional chairpersons and the Global Alliance of National Human Rights Institutions (GANHRI) Chairperson, Professor Beate Rudolf. In her address, she later pointed out with emphasis that NHRIs should abide by the rules of the Global Alliance in honouring payment of annual affiliation subscription fees and general compliance with the Paris Principles. She underscored the fact that there would be no write-offs of unpaid or outstanding subscriptions contrary to requests by a number of NHRIs whose countries were smarting under serious international debt. We should therefore congratulate ourselves for being among the few fully paid up (NHRIs). She further advised that non-complying NHRIs would continue to suffer the fate of downgrading from 'A' to 'B' Status as happened with Burundi in February 2018.

The Conference was attended by close to 280 NHRIs' representatives from across the globe and team presentations facilitated by moderators explored the roles and contributions NHRIs could play in expanding civic space and promoting and protecting human rights defenders with particular attention to women human rights defenders. I moderated on day two on the topic "Communicating on human rights and promoting positive narratives" which generated a lot of lively interactive debate mainly because the four presentations had all been very informative and exciting. Throughout, the Conference was enriched by open and no holds barred discussions and debates which were a reflection of the broad range of experience and perspectives from the various NHRIs, human rights defenders, representatives from the UN and regional human rights mechanisms as well as partners from the OHCHR and UNDP.

Some of the areas which participants focused on in their discussions included the following:-

1. Crucial elements of an enabling environment;
2. Methods of monitoring civic space and threats to it;
3. How to protect human rights defenders;
4. How to specifically protect women human rights defenders;

5. How to assist and protect NHRIs who are themselves human rights defenders;
6. How to develop effective communication on human rights and promotion of positive narratives.

The robust engagements and discussions and NHRIs lessons learnt and practices identified, all contributed to the crafting and adoption of the Marrakech Declaration which clearly sets out NHRIs commitments and way forward. I attach the full text of the Declaration for everyone's consumption.

Suffice to say in a nutshell the Declaration identified a number of activities to guide NHRIs in strengthening their promotional and protection activities as well as reinforcing cooperation and partnerships.

In addition to many other commitments, NHRIs resolved to endeavor to accomplish the following:-

1. Contribute to the establishment of national protection systems for human rights defenders, which requires an enabling environment, accessible and inclusive;
2. Raise awareness and support States in the implementation of the UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders;
3. Advance positive narratives on the importance of human rights and the legitimate role of human rights defenders, in particular women human rights defenders;
4. Interact with human rights defenders and civil society in a regular manner and support the development and strengthening of national and regional defenders' network;
5. Set-up efficient and robust early warning mechanisms and focal points within NHRIs; and
6. Interact with the international and regional human rights systems in support of human rights defenders, and monitor follow-up and implementation of recommendations.

The Declaration also encourage GANHRI, its regional networks and all NHRIs to collaborate in mutual capacity building and sharing of experiences and knowledge, including by the elaboration of regional action plans to follow-up on this Declaration and the establishment of a mechanism on human rights defenders within GANHRI.

"The Marrakech Declaration will guide NHRIs's work. We look forward to working with all our partners including human rights defenders implementing the Declaration, at national, regional and global levels," said the GANHRI Chairperson.

Participants expressed their gratitude to the CNDH for the warmth of their hospitality and the excellent organization of the event.



The International Conference also marked the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the endorsement of the Paris Principles and the establishment of the international network of NHRIs, the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Declaration on Human Rights Defenders.

The 14<sup>th</sup> NHRIs International Conference is scheduled to take place in 2021 hosted by an European NHRI.