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Special Rapporteur on human rights and the environment

Statement

The Sixth Meeting of the Parties to the Aarhus Convention  
14 September 2017

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Excellencies, distinguished delegates, ladies and gentlemen,

I have the honor to address at the Sixth Meeting of the Parties to the Aarhus Convention in my capacity as the UN Special Rapporteur on human rights and the environment.

My mandate was created in 2012 by the UN Human Rights Council which has tasked me to study human rights obligations relating to the enjoyment of a safe, clean, healthy and sustainable environment, and to promote best practices relating to the use of human rights in environmental matters.

Human rights and the environment are inseparable and interdependent.

All human beings depend on the environment in which we live. A healthy environment is integral to the full enjoyment of a wide range of human rights, including the rights to life, housing, health, food, water and sanitation. Without a healthy environment, we are unable to fulfil our aspirations or even live at a level commensurate with minimum standards of human dignity.

At the same time, human rights are needed for the protection of the environment. When people are able to learn about, and participate in, the decisions that affect them, they can help to ensure that those decisions respect their need for a healthy and sustainable environment.

For the last five years, I have been working toward making the linkage between human rights and the environment clear in various areas including climate change and biodiversity, clarifying the human rights obligations relating to the environment and making these obligations implementable on the ground.

In the execution of my mandate, while conducting studies, organizing consultations, undertaking country visits, the Aarhus Convention has been an invaluable model of how to clarify and implement rights of information, public participation, and access to justice. For evident reasons, I presented the Aarhus Convention as a good practice in my report to the Human Rights Council in 2015.

The Aarhus Convention makes clear that its three pillars serve the right of each person to live in a healthy environment.

Moreover, the Aarhus is in the forefront of efforts to protect environmental rights around the world. Its own membership continues to grow into other regions, and the agreement is a wonderful example for other regions. Most notably, the countries of the Latin America and the Caribbean region are close to finalizing their own agreement on the Rio Principle 10 access rights, and they have used the experience with the Aarhus Convention as a regular point of reference.

By realizing and implementing these rights in an environmental context, the Aarhus Convention is also helping Parties to the Convention to fulfill the obligations they have under the international human rights treaties. As I have explained to the UN Human Rights Council in my reports, human rights instruments require States to protect the environment in order to protect the human rights that depend on it. In that respect, human rights bodies have made clear that part of that protection is to ensure rights of information, participation, and remedy. All the parties to the Aarhus Convention are parties to one or more human rights treaties, and by implementing the Aarhus Convention, states are meeting their both environmental and human rights obligations in a coherent manner.

This sixth meeting marks another potential milestone in safeguarding human rights and the environment.

As many of you know already, the challenges faced by environmental human rights defenders are of a grave and increasing global concern. Two hundred defenders were murdered in 2016 alone, an average of four every week, and the number is growing each year. These defenders are threatened, harassed and sometimes killed just because they try to protect the environment and exercise their rights.

There is an urgency to take an immediate action to stop this.

In this regard, I am extremely glad that the Aarhus Parties plan to adopt the Budva Declaration at this meeting. The adoption of Budva Declaration will help to provide better protection to environmental human rights defenders and to those who are implementing the core pillars of the Aarhus Convention on the ground.

I strongly encourage all Parties to agree to the adoption of the Declaration and to effectively implement the provisions contained in the Declaration.

In closing, I would like to congratulate the sixth meeting of the Parties and commend all the achievements made by the Aarhus Parties and the members of civil society over the years in protecting both human rights and the environment. In particular, I would like to thank the members of the Aarhus Secretariat who have provided such valuable assistance to my mandate.

I wish you all the best and look forward to continuing our partnership in working toward a world where everyone can enjoy their human rights without discrimination in a healthy environment.

Thank you.