

**Transcript of the side event parallel to the 49th session of the Human Rights Council –  
“Protecting Palestinian Human Rights Defenders and Civil Society Organizations:  
Israel’s Baseless Designation of the 6.”**

**Mary Lawlor, UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights Defenders**

**16.40**

Hello everybody and thank you very much for inviting me here to join you today and thanks to Fionnuala for pointing out the staggering amount, 66% of all communications which have used the misuse of counterterrorism measures against civil society. We see it all over the world. I also want to re-echo her plea that funding for Palestinian human rights defenders and specifically those who have been wrongly branded must continue and I’m going to Holland next month for myself and I’ll certainly raise it.

I’ve had this mandate now for nearly two years. I and my team have regularly spoken to groups of Palestinian human rights defenders online over that time. I have previously visited the West Bank and Gaza twice, including Al-Haq, so was able to listen to human rights defenders and understand better the huge challenges Palestinian human rights defenders face on all fronts. I have also seen the destruction of buildings, such as a cement factory, part of a hospital, and a chicken farm, as a result of the violence.

When the six groups were designated as terrorist organisations, I joined with other UN independent experts, as Fionnuala said, to condemn the decision. It is a dangerous move by the Israeli government, a frontal attack on Palestinian human rights movements and on human rights everywhere. Sadly, it’s something we’ve seen before and will probably see again, a tactic used by governments in many parts of the world to attack human rights defenders. I see the use of antiterrorism laws to target human rights defenders as I said in many countries and my report to the UN General Assembly last year detailed how many defenders are sent to prison for very long terms, around the world, on the pretext of terrorism. States sometimes tell me that someone I know to be a human rights defender is really a terrorist. I tell them I know the difference and in fact the reason the UN appointed me to this position was because of my long experience in this area and it means I can say to the UN who is and who isn’t a human rights defender.

And this is a clear case of intimidation of defenders, part of a long history of vilifying human rights defenders. In her report to the Human Rights Council that’s happening as you know in Geneva now, the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet notes that the six designated organisations have worked for decades to promote human rights and provide critical humanitarian assistance in the Occupied Palestinian Territory and are key partners of the United Nations. The designation decisions were based on vague and unsubstantiated reasons. Some reasonings refer to entirely peaceful and legitimate human rights activities. I know from seeing what happens elsewhere in the world that such smears are highly dangerous, as the High Commissioner notes, not only was the OHCHR unaware of any credible evidence to support these accusations that the groups were inseparable from the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, Israeli security forces also arrested at least sixteen human rights defenders including several staff members of the organisations declared as unlawful or terrorist between November 20 and October 21. We have seen Palestinian defenders also targeted by the Pegasus software and been subjected to physical attacks and I understand they are working in an atmosphere of constant harassment and intimidation.

We know that defenders based at some of the organisations have been targeted for arrest and detention. The High Commissioner is right when she says in her report that the designations and declarations by Israeli authorities of human rights and humanitarian organisations as terrorist and unlawful raise serious concerns that counterterrorism legislation and military orders are being used to hold, restrict or criminalise legitimate human rights and humanitarian work. We will continue to stand with defenders unjustly labelled as terrorists and show how these laws are consistently misused to prevent legitimate human rights work. We will continue to remind governments who support human rights advocacy and who support human rights defenders that just because a government designates someone as a terrorist or a group as a terrorist group it doesn't make it true, and we will continue to advise them on who is and who isn't a human rights defender.

Thank you for giving me the chance to speak today. I would like to finish by saying that I am trying to make my mandate more accessible and we've recently released a short animation film in Arabic and English and in other languages on how to best contact me and with information on what the mandate can and can't do. It is on the [srdefenders.org](http://srdefenders.org) website which will be put in the chat-box now. So thank you and I look forward to the discussion.

**22.56**