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INTERNATIONAL HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS DAY

The National Executive Committee of Advocates for Transformation (AFT) joins the international community in marking International Human Rights Defenders Day. The day reminds us of the essential role played by those who defend human dignity, equality and justice, often at considerable personal risk. Their work strengthens constitutional democracy and protects the rule of law.

The NEC honours the memory of Thulani Maseko, a distinguished lawyer and leading advocate for democracy in Eswatini. His assassination in January 2023, carried out in his home and in the presence of his family, remains unresolved. The failure to bring the perpetrators to justice violates the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights, the ICCPR and the UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders. His legacy demands vigilance and resolve in resisting impunity and upholding the rule of law across the region.

Across the continent, the environment for human rights defenders has deteriorated. In Tanzania, arbitrary arrests, enforced disappearances, restrictions on the media and civil society, and politically-motivated prosecutions have undermined freedoms of expression, association and peaceful assembly. These developments impair judicial independence and place lawyers, journalists and civic actors at risk.

In Nigeria, peaceful protesters, journalists and digital activists have been met with excessive force, mass arrests and the misuse of severe criminal charges. Such actions weaken democratic institutions and contravene fundamental rights protected under international and regional law.

In Sudan, widespread atrocities, mass displacement and the disintegration of accountability mechanisms in the context of the ongoing conflict violate the Geneva Conventions, the Rome Statute and Africa's regional human rights standards. Human rights defenders and humanitarian workers have been silenced, threatened or forced into exile.

In the Democratic Republic of Congo, defenders and journalists (particularly in the eastern provinces) continue to face abductions, torture and assassination at the hands of state forces and armed groups. These violations undermine the African Commission's protections for lawyers and reinforce a climate of impunity.

In Zimbabwe, continuing patterns of abductions, torture, arbitrary detention and politically motivated prosecutions directed at activists, students and members of the legal profession violate binding regional norms and undermine the integrity of civic and judicial processes.

The NEC is further concerned by the sustained persecution of lawyers and human rights defenders in Uganda. Lawyers have been subjected to arbitrary arrest, abductions, torture, surveillance, the raiding of chambers and the criminalisation of legal representation, particularly in matters involving political opposition, torture victims and LGBTQ+ individuals. These actions directly contravene the African Charter, the ICCPR, the UN Basic Principles on



the Role of Lawyers and the UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders. Targeting lawyers for performing their professional duties constitutes an attack on the justice system itself. The NEC calls on Ugandan authorities to cease these violations, ensure accountability and guarantee the independence and safety of the legal profession.

The NEC also records its deep concern regarding the human rights and humanitarian crisis in Gaza, where sustained military operations since 2023 have resulted in mass civilian casualties, widespread destruction of essential infrastructure, the obstruction of humanitarian

aid and the displacement of the overwhelming majority of the population. These acts engage the Geneva Conventions, the Genocide Convention and international criminal law. The continued work of lawyers, medics, journalists and human rights organisations under these conditions reflects exceptional courage in the face of grave danger.

The NEC further notes the grave risks faced by human rights defenders in South Africa, including whistle blowers, forensic investigators, auditors, journalists and justice-sector officials. The assassinations of Babita Deokaran, Cloete Murray, Thomas Murray and others, together with sustained threats directed at prosecutors, SIU officials and civil servants, reflect an erosion of the rule of law and a failure to ensure adequate protection for those who expose corruption or defend constitutional governance. These acts violate the rights to life, dignity, security of the person, freedom of expression, freedom of association and access to courts, and breach South Africa's obligations under domestic and international law. Strengthened protections for whistle blowers, proper resourcing of investigative and prosecutorial bodies and firm action against intimidation are urgently required.

Taken together, these developments illustrate a broader trend in which civic space is shrinking and reprisals against defenders are becoming normalised. This trajectory contradicts the UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders, African Union human rights resolutions and the duties imposed by section 7(2) of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, which requires the state to respect, protect, promote and fulfil the rights in the Bill of Rights.

The NEC affirms that human rights defenders – including lawyers, journalists, whistle blowers, activists and community leaders – are indispensable to the preservation of constitutional democracy. Their work gives effect to rights enshrined in the Constitution, the African Charter, the ICCPR, the UN Basic Principles on the Role of Lawyers and the broader body of international human rights and humanitarian law. Any intimidation, interference or violence directed at them constitutes an attack on the rule of law and requires a decisive response. **A**

Issued by the National Executive Committee of Advocates For Transformation
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