

On human rights day don't point fingers- join hands

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The annual celebration of human rights on 10 December falls on the same day that the EU will receive the Nobel Peace Prize. The coincidence is serendipitous. The EU is being honoured for promoting democracy, human rights, and reconciliation, and for spreading peace and stability across the continent. This is a great recognition of our past achievements. Yet it also focuses the spotlight on all of us -- EU Institutions, Member States, and 500 million citizens -- to work together and redouble our efforts to promote and protect human rights not just within our borders, but worldwide.

Indeed, this past July, the EU adopted a Human Rights Strategy and appointed the first EU Special Representative for human rights. Human rights are the silver thread that runs through the EU's external action: from trade to the environment, aid to security. It is recognition of the fact that in almost every human suffering and conflict in the world today, respect for human rights is a vital part of the solution.

But we can only advance human rights effectively, if we work together and share the responsibility of promoting and protecting them. Advancing rights demands that the EU forge broad alliances -- with other governments, with international organisations, with the private sector, and, above all with civil society. Today the EU works closely with partners around the globe, such as the UN, the OSCE, the Council of Europe and the African Union. We also aspire to a full partnership with hundreds of NGOs from all over the world to seek their advice and amplify the human rights message.

The theme of this year's Human Rights Day -- inclusion and participation in public life -- could not be timelier. The desire to embed these principles in society is the driving force behind what we are witnessing in the Arab world today. The recent steps taken towards democratic transition by several countries in the region and beyond are a beacon of hope for peoples everywhere.

But such progress cannot be taken for granted. Even in countries where democratic transition has taken place, it takes more than one election for deep democracy to take hold. In celebrating the right to public participation we want to honour the work of all human rights defenders who fight for the right to express their views, participate in elections and hold public office. We also want to highlight the important work of civil society in enshrining this right deeply in the social fabric of more and more countries.

A vibrant civil society and enhanced dialogue between NGOs and governments, regional and international organisations is the key to protecting human rights, democracy and the rule of law. Last week, the 14th Annual EU NGO Forum brought together over 200 committed human rights defenders, activists and policy makers in Brussels. At home, they are often lonely voices; together, they form a virtual chorus

of freedom. The EU will throw its full weight behind such advocates of liberty around the world.

This is because exclusion is more the rule rather than the exception in too many places. In many countries, citizens are denied the opportunity to have a say in central decisions affecting their lives. Some are even tortured or imprisoned for expressing their views. One of the European Parliament's 2012 Sakharov Prize winners, Nasrin Sotoudeh, knows this only too well. She has displayed immense courage by putting her life on the line to remonstrate against the restrictions on her family's rights. In doing so she has sent a strong message to Iran and the rest of the world that inspires human rights defenders around the globe. Meanwhile, in China, the 2010 Nobel Peace Prize Laureate Liu Xiaobo continues to serve an eleven year prison sentence imposed for his writings, in clear violation of his right to freedom of expression.

All the while excessive restrictions are being placed on NGOs' freedoms of expression and association. These tactics are often used under the false guise of the protection of other rights, such as the fight against terrorism. NGO workers and human rights defenders frequently face persecution and outright prosecution on a daily basis, or are simply labelled "traitors" of their countries in order to be intimidated into silence. The denial of access to funding, essential to the existence of many NGOs, is on the rise and must be curbed.

The human rights movement will have truly succeeded when every person feels a shared responsibility to respond to the urgent need to fight for the rights of others. We should look to 10 December this year as a new start for this profound universal challenge. So on human rights day let us not point fingers, but join hands for a common effort to ensure that every woman and every man has the opportunity to have their say in shaping their personal lives, and the lives of their communities and their societies.