



# Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative

New Delhi, India. London, UK. Accra, Ghana

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*NGO with Special Consultative Status with the Economic & Social Council of the United Nations*

## **41st Regular Session of the UN Human Rights Council**

### **Item 4: General Debate on Human rights situations that require the Council's attention**

#### **Oral statement delivered by the Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative**

**Wednesday, 3 July 2019**

Thank you, Mr. Vice-President.

The Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative (CHRI) expresses deep concerns about the deterioration of human rights in Commonwealth countries. We would like to bring to the Council's attention the trend of legislative measures being used to suppress free expression, and clamp civic space as well as other some troubling developments.

The Tanzanian Parliament recently passed the Written Laws (Miscellaneous Amendments No. 3 of 2019) Act that makes amendments to eight laws and imposes sweeping limitations on the rights to freedom of expression, peaceful assembly and association. With the amendments to the NGO Act, the Registrar has wide discretionary powers to suspend or deregister NGOs and to 'monitor and evaluate' their performance in the absence of clear guidelines. There was lack of consultation with civil society over the bill's review.

Freedom of expression and religion remain an endemic problem in Bangladesh. Laws such as the Digital Security Act (DSA) have been used to restrict freedom of expression. The DSA serves as the de facto "blasphemy law", criminalising anyone who 'hurts or may hurt religious beliefs'. It has been used to target religious minorities, journalists, atheist activists and bloggers.

In Cameroon, the Anglophone crisis has continued to escalate. About half a million people have fled their homes in fear of violence and remain internally displaced. Several armed separatist groups demanding independence of the Anglophone regions have inflicted violence on perceived opponents, while the Government has responded with increasing violence allegedly killing civilians and detaining and torturing the alleged separatists, further exacerbating the crisis.

We also remain deeply concerned by challenges to religious freedom in India and reports of communally motivated or targeted violence. Similarly, concerned citizens continue to review the ongoing, controversial National Register of Citizens in the state of Assam and its potential fallout. The Register is to be published on July 31.

We call on the Council to take urgent notice of these situations and urge governments to uphold their obligations to promote and protect human rights and to make robust efforts to safeguard democratic and civic space. Thank you, Mr. Vice-President.