

NEWS RELEASE

‘Who defends human rights defenders?’ – UN Special Rapporteur during UP-hosted roundtable discussion



UN Special Rapporteur May Lawlor (left) and the Dean of UP’s Law Faculty, Prof Elsabe Schoeman (right).

PRETORIA - The University of Pretoria’s (UP) Centre for Human Rights recently co-hosted a roundtable discussion in conjunction with the Initiative of Women Human Rights Defenders to address increasing safety concerns for human rights defenders. The event featured United Nations Special Rapporteur Mary Lawlor, who is visiting South Africa in response to various civil society organisations having raised the alarm.

“We know that 300 to 400 human rights defenders – a conservative estimate – are killed every year,” said Lawlor in her opening remarks, adding that addressing the killing of human rights defenders is her first priority and their long-term imprisonment is her second. “It’s just so cruel when people are locked away on charges such as terrorism, or subversion of the state or anti-government activities,” she said.

The discussion centred on the protection of human rights defenders, especially in Africa, and touched on the status and challenges of human rights violations on the continent. The roundtable also sought to strengthen collaboration between the UN and UP.

“Something that should be much more prominent is the news media,” said Professor Elsabe Schoeman, Dean of UP’s Faculty of Law. “We seem to be focusing on the Global North a lot, but as we know, in Africa, there are a lot of hostilities going on at the moment. We have huge appreciation for people who act as human rights defenders, no matter in what capacity.”

She added that she is very proud of the work of UP’s Centre for Human Rights, which has made significant contributions to the advancement of human rights in Africa.

Lawlor stated that she is mandated to do three things: implement a UN declaration of human rights defenders; keep up with the trends of human rights defenders around the world; and dialogue with governments – this includes encouraging them to ensure that human rights defenders in their country receive fair treatment.

Human rights defenders are now able to lodge anonymous complaints to the UN if they are treated unfairly by their government. The complaint remains confidential for 60 days in order to give the government in question a chance to respond to the complaint, after which it is made public. An assistant to Lawlor explained that human rights defenders have been under-represented in the African context especially.

The discussion provided valuable insight into the struggles that human rights defenders are facing, especially in the Global South. In an era marked by globally significant conflicts, it is vital to ensure that those who dedicate their lives to the protection of others are protected in turn.

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ABOUT THE UNIVERSITY OF PRETORIA

The University of Pretoria (UP) is one of the largest contact and residential universities in South Africa, with its administration offices located on its Hatfield Campus in Pretoria. This 115-year-old institution is also one of the largest producers of research in South Africa.

Spread over seven campuses, it has nine faculties and a business school, the Gordon Institute of Business Science (GIBS). It is the only university in the country with a Faculty of Veterinary Science, which is ranked the best in Africa. UP has 120 academic departments and 92 centres and institutes, accommodating more than 56 000 students and offering about 1 100 study programmes. It has the most academic staff with PhDs (70%), NRF-rated researchers (613).

The 2025 Times Higher Education subject rankings placed UP first in South Africa in the fields of Accounting and Finance; Architecture; Electrical and Electronic Engineering; Law; Sport Science; and Veterinary Science. UP’s Faculty of Law has been ranked as the top law school in Africa for a remarkable eighth consecutive year.

Quacquarelli Symonds (QS) ranked the University among the top five in Africa, as part of their 2024 World University Rankings (WUR). UP was the only South African university featured in the 2023 World University Rankings for Innovation (WURI), falling within in the 101-200 range of innovative universities.

For more information, please go to www.up.ac.za