

# **Governments silence activists' voices, says ACT Alliance report**

News

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Geneva, July 13 (ENInews)--Harsh restrictions on the freedom of human rights organizations are on the rise and the threats include intimidation, persecution and even murder of staff and activists, according to a report released on 8 July by Geneva-based ACT Alliance.

The report, called "Shrinking Political Spaces," recounts extreme cases of repression in countries ranging from Brazil, India, Indonesia, Peru and Malawi to Colombia, Guatemala, Honduras, Paraguay and Zimbabwe, according to a news release from ACT Alliance, an association of 111 churches and church-related organizations that work in humanitarian assistance and development in 140 countries.

In an increasing number of countries, social struggle is deemed a criminal offence. "This is about local people working for human rights and their survival. Governments must stop seeing civil society as a threat," said ACT advocacy officer Suvi Virkkunen.

The report says that repressive governments are increasingly hindering or even halting the work of organizations through campaigns of restriction, prosecution and harassment. Even under democratic governments, such as those of India or Brazil, organizations find it more and more difficult to fulfil their mandate. Discussions about topics likely to antagonise some governments, such as justice, land rights or minority rights, are often demonised or stigmatised.

ACT Alliance general secretary John Nduna says ACT is pushing for change through two channels: the UN human rights system, which has a new special rapporteur on freedom of assembly, and petitioning donor governments to make sure organizations are included in talks with their governments on where

and how they operate.

"The hypocrisy is that some donor governments talk about the importance of civil society and human rights, development and ownership but at the same time can see that the space for actors trying to work is just not there. Where is the action to counter that trend?" says Nduna.

ACT recently took these views to a meeting in Cambodia that set standards for the minimum political and social freedoms civil organizations need to function. The talks set the stage for a high-level meeting in South Korea in November, at which governments, UN and civil society will be asked to agree to these principles.