March 8, 2021

Dear Secretary Blinken,

As a collection of peacebuilding, humanitarian, human rights, diaspora, youth-led and women-led groups committed to supporting the global Youth, Peace and Security Agenda, we congratulate you on your recent Senate confirmation and thank you for standing up for human rights around the world.

We are writing to ask for your support at an urgent moment. Protection and Prevention are two key pillars of the Youth, Peace and Security and the Women, Peace and Security agendas, and the latest UNSCR 2535 features progressive and action-oriented language on protection of young people. Safe and equal participation in public affairs is also a human right of everyone, including young people, enshrined in Article 25 of International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, Article 21 of Universal Declaration on Human Rights and the 53/144 Declaration on Human Rights Defenders. The Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) Act of 2017 calls for the promotions of “the physical safety, economic security, and dignity of women and girls.” The US WPS Strategy sets the objective to ensure “women and girls are safer, better protected, and have equal access to government and private assistance programs, including from the United States, international partners, and host nations.”

However, consultations with young peacebuilders and human rights defenders leading up to The Missing Peace: Independent Progress Study on Youth, Peace and Security, revealed that young people often do not operate in safe environments.

It is estimated that 408 million youth, reside in areas affected by armed conflict or organized violence - roughly 1 in 4 young people. Youth also often constitute the majority of the population in countries with ongoing armed conflicts. When confronted with challenging circumstances, young people take important roles of community mobilizers, peacebuilding agents, community mediators, and frontline human rights defenders, which was officially recognized in the United Nations Security Council Resolution 2250 on Youth, Peace and Security. This is taken with great risk, often to their lives. This is underscored further by recent developments.

In Pakistan, young peacebuilders have been accused of contributing to terrorism in the country. Through these accusations, some have been persecuted and forced to flee. Even after fleeing persecution, the attacks by security forces have continued on their families. This has been experienced by Saba and Gulalai Ismail, co-founders of Aware Girls. Their organization was founded to empower young girls in Pakistan and to prevent youth from joining terrorist organizations. Both Saba and Gulalai have sought asylum and are safely in the US, but their parents have been accused of crimes they did not commit.

In Myanmar/Burma, millions of young women and men have mobilized in the streets, in an intergenerational nationwide civil disobedience movement, to peacefully protest the military coup. The U.N. Special Rapporteur for Myanmar has highlighted that youth have “had a taste of freedom” and do not want their country and future to regress under oppression with military rule. On February 28, in the
most violent day since the coup, at least 18 people were killed and dozens more injured, according to the United Nations, when Myanmar security forces opened fire on crowds. Attacks are likely to escalate, putting young people at the frontlines in imminent threat.

In Nigeria, a youth-led movement erupted after the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS) shot a young motorist in Ughelli, in Delta state, then pushing his body out of the car and driving off with the dead man’s Lexus SUV. The #EndSARS movement in Nigeria mirrors the Black Lives Matter movement in the US in that both were triggered by the impunity of police violence upon marginalized communities and both movements featured dramatic outpourings of young people. Youth are at the forefront of positive change, but they are met with a brutal force endangering them and their families even though they are working to build a more just community.

In Egypt, young peacebuilders and human rights defenders are subjected to grave violations that include detention, enforced disappearance, and torture, travel ban, forcing them to exile, and harassed and detained relatives of activists abroad. Authorities frequently used terrorism charges against peaceful activists and many activists were prosecuted and convicted under vague charges such as "illegally receiving foreign fund" and "operating without legal permission".

The four examples provided above are emblematic of an escalating problem around the world. We ask that the State Department and the Interagency act in this moment to articulate both short- and long-term measures to support young people’s fundamental human rights and recognize the importance of youth in peace and security through meaningful policy change. Specifically, we ask that the State Department prioritize:

1. **Leveraging the US Presidency of the United Nations Security Council this month to host a special debate focused on urgent need to respect, protect and uphold young people’s universal and fundamental rights to foster an enabling and safe environment for young people working on peace and security, and ensure that they do not face reprisals for their work.** The US can call for a special debate at the UN Security Council which can highlight the violence that young people are experiencing and lead the protection of civic spaces which protect human rights, address violence, among other initiatives.

2. **Increasing the knowledge, capacity, and access for youth peacebuilders, especially young women, to funding, like Lifeline: Embattled civil society organizations Assistance Fund, for young human rights defenders and peacebuilders around the world through US Embassies.** Building honest relationships with young people will present an opportunity to raise awareness about Lifeline: Embattled civil society organizations (CSOs) Assistance Fund through all US Embassies for youth. The Lifeline Embattled CSO Assistance Fund provides emergency financial assistance to CSOs under threat or attack and rapid response advocacy and resiliency grants to support CSOs in responding to broader threats against civic space.

3. **Working with the US Congress to prioritize funding youth-led and women-led peacebuilding around the world.** They often do not have access to the necessary funding to expand their work and work on a volunteer basis.

4. **Appointing a US Special Envoy on Youth to ensure the perspectives and concerns of young people are included in US foreign policy.** Young people, including women and girls, are the majority population in many developing and conflict-affected countries around the world. Any development and sustainable peace must include the perspectives and concerns of young people. The appointment of a Youth Envoy will ensure youth perspectives and concerns are incorporated in the US foreign policy at the highest level.
In addition to being an obligation of states to provide immediate redress and support to young peacebuilders under threat, this is a critical and essential opportunity for the US to promote safe and vibrant civic spaces for youth. These movements are fundamental to democracy, and civic spaces must be protected for youth who have demonstrated their capacity to lead and contribute to strong, democratic societies.

Sincerely,

Peace Direct
Search for Common Ground
Alliance for Peacebuilding
Aware Girls
Building Blocks For Peace Foundation
Canadian Coalition for Youth, Peace and Security
CDA Collaborative Learning
Center for Nonviolent Solutions
Center for Peace Advocacy and Sustainable Development (CEPASD)
Center for Policy Analysis of Horn of Africa
Civil Society Platform for Peacebuilding and Statebuilding
Commonwealth Youth Peace Ambassadors Network (CYPAN)
For Peace
Friends Committee on National Legislation
Generations For Peace
Inclusive Peace
International Association for Political Science Students (IAPSS)
International Civil Society Action Network (ICAN)
Justice Call for Rights and Development

Khalifa Ihler Institute
MENA Coalition
National Partnership of Children and Youth in Peacebuilding
NewGen Peacebuilders
Local Youth Corner
Peace Initiative Network
Rwanda Clubs for Peace
STAND: The Student-Led Movement to End Mass Atrocities
Syrian Youth Assembly
Transformative Leaders Network - Africa
United Nations Association of the National Capital Area
UNOY Peacebuilders
WE organization NL
Yemen Youth Forum for Peace
Young Adult Empowerment Initiative
Youth Coalition Against Terrorism (YOCAT)
Youth Festival for Peace
Youth for Peace International
Youth Network For Peace and Development
Nepal
18by Vote
+Peace

cc:

Amb. Samantha Power, USAID Administrator Designate
Amb. Linda Thomas-Greenfield, US Ambassador to the UN
Senator Robert Menendez, Senate Foreign Relations Committee
Senator James Risch, Senate Foreign Relations Committee
Congressman Gregory Meeks, House Foreign Affairs Committee
Congressman Michael McCaul, House Foreign Affairs Committee
Congresswoman Grace Meng, House Appropriations Committee
Congressman John Curtis, House Energy and Commerce Committee
Congressman Dean Phillips, House Foreign Affairs Committee