

Opening of the 31th session of the Human Rights Council

The Human Rights Council (HRC) opened its thirty-first session on the 29th February, in the distinguished presence of the President of the General Assembly, *Mogens Lykketoft*, the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, *Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein*, and the Head of the Federal Department of Foreign Affairs of Switzerland, *Didier Burkhalter*. The opening of the March session, which is considered the main HRC session of the year and is scheduled from 29th February to 24th March, was presided over by *Choi Kyong-Lim*, who took on his mandate as President of the Council on the occasion.

The 31st session of the HRC is all the more important as it coincides with two milestones, namely the 50th anniversaries of the ratification of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the International Covenant on Cultural, Economic and Social Rights, and the 10th anniversary of the founding of the Council itself.

Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, in his powerful statement, compared human rights violations to the « *sharp zig-zag lines of a seismograph flashing out warnings of a coming earthquake.* » He deplored the gravity of such violations today, and called on leaders to take actions now to relieve the pressure on rights, in order to avoid future explosive consequences.

The High Commissioner condemned the tendency to retreat towards nationalism in front of global challenges, and the « *rising wind of prejudice and fear.* » He particularly dwelled on the violations of humanitarian law in Syria, namely the attacks directed towards hospitals, medical units and healthcare personnel, and urged for the respect of the Geneva Conventions in all conflict areas.

Mentioning the violence in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, Yemen, Burundi, Sudan, the OPT, Ukraine and other regions of the world, *Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein* called once more for an end to the suffering of civilians. Finally, taking a strong stance against xenophobia, anti-immigrant and anti-minority rhetoric, he called for the sympathy and compassion of the international community towards fleeing migrants, stating that « *to keep building higher walls against the flight of these desperate people is an act of cruelty and delusion.* »

The Human Rights Council opens the High-Level Segment

Choi Kyong-Li, President of the HRC, opened the High-Level Segment of the 31st session. President of Togo, Captains-Regents of San Marino, and dignitaries from 28 States and Organizations, including *Irina Bokova*, Director-General UNESCO and *Michaëlle Jean*, Secretary General of the Organisation internationale de la Francophonie, delivered statements on this first day of the High-Level Segment.

The recurring issues among the statements were: the Syrian conflict and the need to find urgent solutions to the loss of civilian lives, as well as to work on holding the recently agreed upon ceasefire; the migrants' crisis and the need for full, multilateral cooperation to find viable solutions and uphold the rights of migrants and refugees; the protracted violence perpetrated by Daesh and the global plague of terrorism; the situation of human rights in Ukraine; the worrying rise in racial discrimination and xenophobia ; the false choice between national security measures and human rights ; and the importance of protecting women's rights and gender equality for the development process.

It is also to be noted that the violations of human rights in the Occupied Palestinian Territories was mentioned in only three of the statements, by the Minister for Foreign Affairs of Qatar, the Minister for Foreign Affairs of Luxembourg and the Deputy Prime Minister, Turkey. Recurrently, Tunisia was given as an example for its transition to democracy and its new Constitution (by the Minister for Foreign Affairs of Qatar, the Minister for Foreign Affairs, France, and the United Nations Development Program representative).

H.E. Mr. Augusto Santos Silva, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for foreign affairs of Portugal strongly condemned impunity for the perpetrators of human rights violations in Syria. He asserted the fact that the right to education must be granted at all times, particularly in times of conflict. He also highlighted the role Portugal is playing in alleviating the suffering of Syrian refugees though providing them with the adequate services most importantly offering them the chance to pursue free education in universities in host countries. The Minister urged all hosting countries to take similar steps in dealing with the Syrian refugee's issue.

H.E. Sheikh Mohammed Bin Abdulrahman bin Jassim Al-Thani, Minister for Foreign Affairs of Qatar, delivered a strong statement, expressing his concerns about the degrading situation of human rights in the world, and condemning the double standards approach that compromised the system of collective security of the UN. The Minister asserted the active involvement of Qatar in the implementation of the UN counter –terrorism strategy.

Further on, he noted that the occupation of the Palestinian Territories and the expansion of illegal settlements by Israel remain a stigma to humanity, and condemned the demolitions of schools, the aggressions against mosques, namely Al-Aqsa mosque, and the inhumane treatment of prisoners in the OPT in addition to the long-standing siege of Gaza. His Excellency also denounced the suffering of women and children civilians in Syria, condemning the developments in the Syrian conflict as "*tantamount to a genocide*".

He further condemned the rise of terrorism worldwide, all the while warning against the tendency to define terrorism by linking it to specific religion or culture, and firmly rejected the erroneous use of freedom of expression as justification for incitement to hatred and extremism.

Annual high-level panel discussion on human rights mainstreaming “The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and human rights, with an emphasis on the right to development”

This year’s High-Level panel discussion on human rights mainstreaming was organized under the theme “*The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and human rights, with an emphasis on the right to development*”. The panel explored opportunities arising from the 2030 Agenda to advance the mainstreaming of all human rights throughout the UN system, with an emphasis on the right to development.

The advancement of women and girls’ rights was one of the main pillars of the discussion, as well as the interaction between human rights mechanisms and the SDGs, and the ways these can mutually reinforce each other.

The panelists included **H.E. Mr. Zamir Akram**, Chair-Rapporteur of the Working Group on the Right to Development and former Permanent Representative of Pakistan to the United Nations in Geneva, **Ms. Helen Clark**, Administrator of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and Chair of the United Nations Development Group, **Dr. Babatunde Osotimehin**, Executive Director, United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), **Mr. Yannick Glemarec**, Deputy Executive Director, United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN-Women), and **Ms. Jan Beagle**, Deputy Executive Director, Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS).

H.E. Mr. Ban Ki-moon, Secretary-General of the United Nations, provided the opening statement for the panel, alongside **H.E. Mr. Mogens Lykketoft**, President of the 70th session of the General Assembly of the United Nations and **Mr. Zeid Ra’ad Al Hussein**, United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights.

Mr. Ban Ki-moon spoke on the 2030 Agenda as a major step forward for human rights. He mentioned that added value of the Agenda is the fact that it enshrines the principle that a society is only as strong as its weakest member, and promises to leave no one behind. Echoing his own experience as a refugee fleeing war, **Mr. Ban Ki-Moon** spoke of the most vulnerable as the main rightful beneficiaries of the achievement of the agenda and the implementation of the right to development.

In his opening remarks, **Mr. Zeid Ra’ad Al Hussein** noted the undeniable convergence between the Declaration on the right to development and the 2030 Agenda, through common points such as combatting all structural inequalities and prioritizing gender equality and women empowerment. He further encouraged the States to deliver on the promises of the Agenda and take concrete action.

The main points highlighted by the discussion revolved around the symbiotic relationship between the right to development and the SDGs; the holistic approach seeking to benefit all of humanity and combat all kind of discrimination; and the absolute need for international cooperation for the implementation of both the SDGs and the right to development.

In terms of country interventions, *Saudi Arabia* delivered a statement underlining the fight against hunger, the promotion of access to education and the creation of employment as the main priorities for development. The Saudi Arabia delegate emphasized the important part played by the country in development aid and the reforms adopted on the way to achieve sustainable development. Further on, Bahrain noted the need to eliminate poverty and restated the engagement of the country to achieve the SDGs. Bahrain is at the forefront of human development and encouraged for common determination to achieve a comprehensive development for all.

Pakistan delivered a statement on behalf of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, highlighting that the realization of right to development is crucial for the realization of all human rights.

The second day of the High -level segment of the 31st session (Fifth meeting)

The afternoon session added to the work of the morning session with a powerful statement delivered by *H.E. Riyad Al Maliki*, Minister of Foreign Affairs for the State of Palestine asserting the right of self-determination for the Palestinian people. He expressed his regret that the voices of extremism are still louder than the language of Human Rights.

The minister raised the question of the credibility of the human right's mechanisms that are still incapable of freezing the illegal settlement activities up to this moment. He added that blatant violations of human rights were revealed in the last report of the commission of inquiry, yet action has not been taken to hold the perpetrators accountable for their crimes. Stating that Israel is a state above law and without accountability. He concluded by calling on the council to undertake its role in protecting human rights in a more efficient and credible manner.

Russia followed with a statement from its Foreign Affairs Minister *H.E. Mr. Sergey V. Lavrov* who devoted an essential part of his speech addressing the Syrian conflict. He warned from undermining the concept of sovereignty under any pretext including the use human rights. He also stressed the necessity of learning lessons from the Arab Spring and its unfolding repercussions. He expressed his satisfaction from the progress made in delivering assistance to the Syrian people and called for ensuring a sustainable and comprehensive peace deal in Syria with an inclusive approach involving all parties. *Mr. Lavrov* also covered the issue of terrorism and asked for working on finding means for cutting off terrorists supplies from the outside. He underlined the importance of tackling the refugee's problem and recommended developing a viable structure in order to deal with the non-stopping flow of migration. Palestine was also present in *Mr. Lavrov* statement, where he called for finding a fair and just solution for the Palestinian enduring conflict.

Later on, H.E. Mr. Ramtane Lamamra, the Algerian Minister of Foreign Affairs reasserted what his Russian counterpart stated about human rights concerns in Syria and Libya, and confirmed Algeria's commitment to maintaining peace and security in Libya following the Arab Spring. The minister referred to the amendments made to the Algerian constitution favoring respect for Human Rights. He also deplored the resignation of the special rapporteur to the OPT who had to give up on the mission assigned to him due to the absence of cooperation from the Israeli side, and called on the council to assume his duties within the norms and rules set by international human rights laws. Also he drew the attention to Western Sahara for being the last remaining colony in Africa and called working on finding mechanism to ending colonialism in that region.

Dialogue with the Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights Defenders

The Human Rights Council held, on the 3rd March 2016, a clustered interactive dialogue featuring **Michel Forst, Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders** and **Adama Dieng, Special Adviser to the Secretary-General on the prevention of genocide**. Mr. Dieng addressed the progress made on the prevention of genocide, as well as serious concerns that were affecting the implementation of his mandate, like the disregard for international human rights and humanitarian law in many situations of conflict. Mr. Forst presented his annual thematic report on the situation of human rights defenders, focused on good practices in the protection of human rights defenders.

The session was marked by the tragic murder of Berta Cáceres, a renowned Honduran indigenous and environmental rights activist, on the 3rd March 2016. In their interventions, the Special Rapporteur Michel Forst, as well as the States and NGOs deplored her death and called for a thorough investigation to be initiated urgently by the Honduran authorities.

The clustered dialogue included interventions from the part of States, National Human Rights Institutions (NHRI), and NGOs. The main issues raised by the interventions revolved around: the increasing number of violent attacks and intimidation against human rights defenders in various regions of the world; the worrying tendency to reduce civil society space, particularly in the context of counterterrorism and national security measures; the situation of the women human rights defenders and defenders belonging to ethnic or other types of minorities, who face particular dangers; the salient need to bring perpetrators of violence against defenders before justice, and ensure an end to impunity; and the obligation of States to protect defenders and ensure a safe environment.

The representative of **Palestine** delivered a statement raising the issue of perpetrated targeted attacks against human rights defenders in the Occupied Palestinian Territories. He reminded that the responsibility to ensure a safe environment for human rights defenders is incumbent on the States, and condemned the violent attacks, arbitrary arrests and persecutions perpetrated by Israel in the OPT. He deplored the persistent impunity on this

issue and inquired upon the Special Rapporteur on the measures that can be employed to protect defenders in an environment where impunity reigns and State policies perpetrate violations at their regard, as in the OPT.

Among the NGOs, the issue of the situation of human rights defenders in Egypt was repeatedly raised. Equally, the Cairo Institute for Human Rights denounced the unprecedented measures against defenders taken in Egypt a large effort to shut down public space. There was mention of a new law imposing travel ban on defenders.

The situation in Bahrain was also raised in the NGO statements, particularly the harassment and arbitrary arrests of various defenders including the President of the Bahraini Center of Human Rights.

Finally, in his concluding remarks, Michel Forst underlined the tight connection between his mandate and that of the Special Adviser to the Secretary-General on the prevention of genocide, noting that often, an increase in attacks against human rights defenders is an early warning that the situation risks to degenerate in perpetrated mass violence and even genocide.

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