



Joint Virtual Briefing on Human Rights Council (resumed 43rd and 44th regular sessions)

27 May 2020, 16h00-18h00

On 27 May 2020, the Human Rights Council held a **virtual briefing** to discuss the modalities of the resumed 43rd regular session and the 44th regular session of the Council.

In her opening remarks, [Elisabeth Tichy-Fisslberger](#), President of the Human Rights Council, referred to the **Concept Note** sent by the Director-General of the UNOG, Tatiana Valovaya on 22 May. However, a lot of the information in the Note, she said, was still under consideration. Ms Tichy-Fisslberger also noted that earlier that day, the Swiss authorities had made an announcement, confirming that **Human Rights Council could meet in June or July** if it wished to do so. The 43rd session was envisaged to be resumed on 15 June and the 44th session would open on 22 June 2020.

Ambassador [Valentin Zellweger](#), Permanent Representative of Switzerland, further announced that **the events of up to 300 people could go ahead** – provided that hygiene and social distance were in place – from 6 June 2020 on. The decision about the **meetings of more than 1,000 people** will be made on **24 June 2020**, he said.

The representatives of the [UNOG Conference Services and HRC Branch](#) spoke about the **reduced capacity** of the facilities: there is now a 5 to 6 times reduction for each conference room's capacity. Thus, Room XX could only hold 103 people simultaneously (with its usual capacity of 638). Meetings of **Treaty Bodies** were postponed because most of the experts were not able to travel to Geneva. It was noted that holding of **virtual meetings** was challenging (due to difficulties with procedural points, rights of reply, and voting). Finally, it was announced that the use of **Room XIX – the Qatar Room** – would be preferable for the HRC plenaries. It could host 134 delegates simultaneously.

[Ms Tichy-Fisslberger](#) further referred to the fact that some states suggested to **shorten the Agenda** and stick to the priorities. This was impossible, she said, because different States had different priorities. Ms Tichy-Fisslberger confirmed that there would be **no lunch-time** meetings. She also said that the **Assembly Hall** could not be used for the plenaries, since it did not provide for video and teleconferencing, which would be needed for ID with the Special Procedures, as well as for the webcasting. The same measures were applied in Geneva as they were applied in New York, namely, only **one person per delegation** was allowed in the meeting room. Having an **overflow or waiting room** was currently under consideration. Regarding the **informal consultations**, Ms Tichy-Fisslberger said that there would be no informals at the *Palais des Nations*. Main sponsors would be encouraged to do the informal consulting in writing or virtually. However, efforts were made to allow for at least one informal meeting per resolution at another venue – more information on that was coming soon.

Questions and Comments by States and Civil Society Organizations

In the ensuing discussion, [representatives of states](#) insisted that the top priority should remain the **health and safety** of all delegates and the UN staff. Strict preventive measures should remain in place. Some countries suggested that the Human Rights Council should be postponed or held virtually, as it was the case with the World Health Assembly. Others expressed their strong support to resuming the important and unfinished work of the Human Rights Council in-person, and the need to address the new challenges. Speakers agreed that **equal and full participation** should be ensured. Some states were preoccupied about the foreseeable **second and third waves** of the epidemic. Covid-19 pandemic has not been brought under full control. What measures can be taken to ensure that the Human Rights



Council is functioning despite the danger – now and in the future? Other speakers wanted to know more about the meetings of **Regional Groups** and **Informal meetings**. It is difficult for delegations with limited capacity to attend the meetings outside the Palais, some states said. Why cannot UNOG allocate one of the larger rooms for informals, they asked. Some speakers insisted that **informal meetings** should continue to be listed in the Bulletin of informal meetings. Other states wanted to know what will be the modalities for the **Interactive Dialogue** resumed during the HRC43. Yet others wondered what the new Programme of Work will look like. A number of states explained that a lot of their work depended on **interaction with the Capitals** – which could now be difficult, because many countries are still under the lockdown. Some speakers expressed their concern about the challenges posed by conducting the **virtual meetings**. Other speakers requested information about the possibility of online voting. Other states inquired about the work of translation services and the “overflow” room. A number of speakers expressed concern about the effective participation of **smaller delegations** in the Council. A number of states also expressed their concern about the **NGOs participation** in view of travel restrictions. Some speakers recalled that it is important to allow for voting, and asked if the **Agenda** could be reduced. They called for the Council to be more pragmatic, open and willing to compromise. Some other countries inquired if the **video-recorded statements** would be allowed.

*Taking the floor during the briefing were the following **States**: Burkina Faso, Peru, China, Australia, EU, Georgia, Singapore, Netherlands, Venezuela, Egypt, Mexico, Namibia, Malaysia, Montenegro, UK, South Africa, Syria, Indonesia, Germany, Cuba, France, Saudi Arabia, Fiji, Lebanon, Japan, Nicaragua, Iran, Canada, Bangladesh, Myanmar, Philippines, Eritrea, Vietnam, Libya, Ukraine, Maldives, India, Marshall Islands.*

Civil society representatives raised a number of other issues. Human Rights Watch representative said that the focus should be on **sharing information**, while NGOs should receive all the relevant information at the same time as the states. **Webcasting** should be available for all plenary sessions. **Informal meetings** should be listed in the bulletin. Conectas expressed concern about the **safety** of the NGO representatives participating in the Council. Iuventum said that the **Zero draft** of the Resolutions should be made available for the NGO representatives before the informals. Plan International insisted on the importance of **inclusion of children and women** in discussions.

*Also taking the floor were the following **Non-Governmental organizations**: Human Rights Watch, Conectas - Direitos Humanos (Joint Statement), iuventum e.v, and Plan International.*

Concluding Remarks

On behalf of **Ms Corinne Momal-Vanian**, Director of Conference Management Division, **Mr Eric Tistounet**, Chief of HRC Branch, addressed the issue of **in-person meetings** at the UNOG, saying that UNOG does not have full word in decision-taking for more in-person meetings. If things continue to evolve positively, it may become possible for the UNOG to open a second room (Assembly Hall) for informals – this will have to be reviewed. He also noted that **interpreters** can only work for 2 hours, because the audio quality is not the same as in person.

In his own capacity, as of a representative of HRC Branch, Mr Tistounet also added that the **Concept Note** was written in the past 48 hours, prior to the Swiss government updates, and it was not “cast in stone”. As for the meeting in person at the Palais, he said that the Council can move to **virtual or hybrid meetings** – working procedures can be adapted or adjusted – but the Council will have to take a common decision. Virtual or hybrid meetings, however, may prolong the Council’s work. Hybrid model has already been in place (e.g. ID with special rapporteurs). Panels are also possible, since they



do not allow for point of order or right to reply. Regarding the pre-recorded **video-messages** sent by NGOs and smaller states, Mr Tistounet that Decision 19/119 indeed provided such a possibility. **Voting** process is very complex, with all the amendments, procedures in motions, etc. The Council has to be sure that every voice is heard in an equal manner.

Ms Elizabeth Tichy-Fisslberger said that the purpose was not to review the Human Rights Council, but to show that it was relevant. She said that the Bureau is committed to priority of health and safety and the Swiss government is reliable in ensuring safety. She further reminded, that there will be no lunch meetings, and that delegates will not have to be present in the room, unless they speak or they vote. She also referred to a “smart mix” of virtual and physical presence. Masques, she said, were not prescribed but recommended. Voting by proxy would be difficult. Ms Tichy-Fisslberger noted that she was not in the position to answer to all the questions and comments immediately, but the Secretariat and the Bureau will discuss them. She concluded by saying that the Council needed to be flexible, even if the conditions are not ideal.