

HUMAN RIGHTS COUNCIL – 52nd SESSION

Opening of the Session

(28 February 2023, 09h-09h40)

President of the UN Human Rights Council – H.E. Mr. Václav Bálek

The first regular session of the Human Rights Council (HRC) of the year is in many ways the main session of the Council. H.E. Mr. Václav Bálek thanked the Council for entrusting him with the important task of presiding over the Council, the most important forum on human rights in the UN. Mr. Bálek reiterated that the constructive atmosphere and cooperative spirit is essential for the effective functioning of the Council, allowing for an open exchange of views and frank discussion while respecting the dignity inherent in this body. Mr. Bálek welcomed all delegations and other stakeholders who will participate in the session, including the 14 Government officials whose participation has been made possible by the Voluntary Technical Assistance Fund supporting the participation of LDCs and SIDS. By the request of Gambia, the Council held a moment of silence in honor of the victims of the recent earthquake in Türkiye and Syria.

President of the 77th session of the General Assembly – H.E. Mr. Csaba Kőrösi

This year marks the 75th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) and the 30th anniversary of the Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action. Simultaneously, we are facing unprecedented, cascading, and interlocking crises. The world has not recovered from the COVID-19 pandemic. Over 70 countries are in debt, women and girls remain marginalized in many countries, we are not on track to achieve the 2030 Agenda, armed conflicts have risen, including an aggression from a Permanent Member of the Security Council against a neighboring Member State. The Council and the General Assembly are at a crossroads between continuing business as usual compounding the crisis of trust in multilateralism, and translating the political consensus on the need to cooperate into transformative solutions. We must transform the way things are done and how we manage interlocking crises. Climate change threatens human rights to water and sanitation, food, health, adequate housing, self-determination and the right to life. Some Member States have argued that the right to a clean, sustainable and healthy environment is a galvanized political sentiment; others have indicated that it is worthy of implementing legislation and action; others believe that it is a human right which is collective rather than individual. These discussions are welcome, and the Council must help us go further. No state has a perfect track record, human rights violations exist in every country. Effective fulfilment of human rights will only come about by assuming our responsibilities as governments and as individuals and recognizing that the crises we face are human crises. The rights of marginalized and vulnerable people must be advanced. Women must be fully equally and meaningfully involved in decision making. The full power of the treaty body system must be harnessed. The General Assembly must mainstream human rights throughout its work. Prevention is the path towards peaceful and inclusive societies. We must address the crisis of trust by putting the rule of law front and center. Transformation will rest on respect for human rights, or there will be no transformation at all.

Secretary-General of the United Nations – H.E. Mr. António Guterres

The UDHR, adopted 75 years ago, described for the first time entitlements that apply to everyone, everywhere, always. It is too often misused, exploited for political gain, and ignored. Today it is under assault. The Russian invasion of Ukraine has triggered the massive violations of human rights, with death, destruction and displacement. The public disregard and private disdain for human rights are a wakeup call. The UDHR must be revitalized to face new challenges using the *Call to Action for Human*

*Rights*¹ as a blueprint. Human rights are the solution, from the climate emergency to the use of technology, not a luxury that can be left until other problems are solved. Instead of continuing the progress in human rights and development, we have gone in reverse. Extreme poverty and hunger are rising; vast areas are becoming human rights disaster zones where people are 15 times more likely to die of climate impacts; a record 100 million people have been forced to flee by violence, conflict and human rights violations; Antisemitism, anti-Muslim bigotry, persecution of Christians, racism and white supremacist ideology are growing; religious, linguistic and ethnic minorities, LGBTQI+ and other minority communities are targeted; women's sexual and reproductive rights are denied and gender-based discrimination and violence are rampant; the number of media workers killed around the world last year rose by 50 percent and the pandemic left behind a pandemic of abuses of civil and political rights. Critical climate tipping points can crush the human rights of generations to come and misuse of new technologies can lead to a world with no protection from misinformation, disinformation and lies.

The lessons of history must be heard. The global consensus around the UDHR must be protected and promoted. *Our Common Agenda*² sets out a vision for the future with people and their rights at the center, including a *New Global Deal* to heal divisions, and a *New Agenda for Peace* as a holistic vision from prevention to mediation, peacekeeping and peacebuilding. A new *Agenda for Protection* will be launched in July 2023 with the High Commissioner, seeking to strengthen support to Member States to protect people and their rights. The Council with its various mechanisms, including the UPR, the Special Procedures and the Treaty Bodies, as well as the OHCHR, are essential to create progress, upholding the principles of justice and accountability, and supporting the efforts of human rights defenders. The International Court of Justice has a unique role in matters of international justice and accountability. Progress made to ensure human rights violations are prosecuted at the national and regional levels is welcomed, including violations committed by the private sector. Legal action against companies destroying the climate is an important step forward. The worst enemy of the UDHR is complacency. We must stand with civil society, human rights defenders, people with disabilities, women, girls and young people around the world who are already on the streets, demanding the protection of all human rights, for everyone.

United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights – **Mr. Volker Türk**

75 years ago, states in Africa, Asia, the Americas, Europe and the Middle East together designed a handbook for the prevention of misery, war and evil. Since then, there have been profound advances and remarkable achievements which must be preserved and financed. A treaty-based system and an institutional architecture for the promotion and protection of human rights includes the Council and its innovative UPR and Special Procedures. Innovative movements drawing on human rights principles include movements for the rights of indigenous peoples; Black Lives Matter; #MeToo; and Fridays for Future. Especially young people speak in the language of human rights. The oppression of the past can return in disguise, old authoritarianism, suffocating patriarchy, or wars of aggression from a bygone era as we have witnessed with the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Artificial intelligence and the online world threaten elections, health, and security. A shift from exploitation of digital technology for profit and oppression, to investment in digital innovation to tackle poverty, climate change, and inequality is needed. Progress made over decades is being reined back and even reversed. The spirit that led to the adoption of the UDHR must be rekindled and a new world-wide consensus on human rights forged. A transformative, solution-oriented, and unifying human rights vision must be promoted and implemented. The *Human Rights 75 Initiative*³ (2023) aims to rebuild trust between States, people and their governments, communities, and the future generations and the planet. Member States and all relevant actors must take the lead in advancing all human rights. Cross-regional engagement should be

¹ <https://www.un.org/en/content/action-for-human-rights/index.shtml>. The Call to Action for Human Rights sets out seven areas for urgent attention: rights at the core of sustainable development; rights in times of crisis; gender equality; civic space; future generations; collective action; and new frontiers.

² <https://www.un.org/en/content/common-agenda-report/>

³ <https://www.ohchr.org/en/human-rights-75>

deepened. Serious violations and abuses must be addressed. The sincere commitment to human rights and to counter hatred and division must be communicated to the public. Our generation's commitment to human rights must be re-established, and States can share transformational promises that they would like to make at the high-level event planned in December in this regard. Willingness to engage in genuine dialogue and a desire to seek common denominators even amid disagreements is core to our common language. The UDHR not only voices ancient wisdoms from all cultures but will ensure our survival.

President of the Swiss Confederation (host country) – H.E. Mr. Ignazio Cassis

Russian armed forces have flagrantly violated the UN Charter for 368 days. Shocking violations of human rights and IHL committed in Ukraine include massacres of civilians, sexual violence, detention camps, torture, deportation of children and adolescents, and repression and imprisonment of opponents. This Council was wrong to think such lists would never have to be spoken of again in Europe. The founding States of the UN committed themselves 75 years ago to protect the individual from arbitrary behavior. Unfortunately, millions of women, men and children are deprived of their most fundamental rights. Many people have been imprisoned and even tortured for peacefully expressing their opinion; executed on the basis of expedited trials and forced confessions; and victims of violence, forced to flee because of their gender, their ethnic, linguistic or religious identity. Although Ukraine is on the front line today, no human tragedies that are before the Council today are forgotten. Significant progress has also been made in human rights and more States are ratifying the relevant Conventions to protect their citizens. The creation of the various special tribunals and courts, including the ICC, is among of the greatest advances, as well as access to education and health and equality between men and women before the law. However, a gap between the commitment of States and reality persists. The hope of seeing democracy, rule of law and human rights take hold around the world has not materialized. The Council must tackle disagreements and speak of things with their proper names. Human rights violations must be documented worldwide. Those who commit crimes must be held accountable. Multilateralism must be strengthened, focusing more on its prime objective and purpose – peace. There is no peace without dialogue. Switzerland is ready to support the search for solutions.