

## HUMAN RIGHTS COUNCIL – 54th SESSION

### Oral Update by the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights

12 September 2023

In his oral update, **Mr. Volker Türk, United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights**, highlighted that people everywhere have a right to a decent standard of living. To ensure this, they want active and meaningful participation in decisions, and governments that serve their needs. However, people suffer from a deprivation of this right; injustice, poverty, exploitation, and repression are the causes of grievances that drive tensions, conflicts, displacement, and further misery.

He reported the human rights emergency in Iraq and many other countries. **Climate change** is pushing millions of people into famine. It is destroying hopes, opportunities, homes, and lives. In recent months, urgent warnings have become lethal realities again and again all around the world. Serious governance issues, and failure to invest in the infrastructure for rights, helped cause this crisis, together with climate change, pollution, and population growth. Governance reforms can better equip societies to react, adapt, and build resilience to decreasing water access. He further reported the recent challenges of **China, El Salvador, Mexico, and India**.

I was shocked by the nonchalance that becomes apparent in the face of more than 2,300 people reported dead or missing in the Mediterranean this year, including the loss of more than 600 lives in a single shipwreck off Greece in June. It is evident that far more **migrants and refugees** are dying, unnoticed, in the seas around Europe, including the Channel; in the Bay of Bengal, and in the Caribbean, where people seeking protection are constantly pushed back and deported to situations of grave danger; or along the US-Mexican border, where deportations and expedited removal processes raise serious issues; or at the border of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

The High Commissioner focused on **SDG16 on Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions**. Its emphasis is on this interlocking relationship between good governance and development. Every development goal is grounded in equality and human dignity. They all require accountable institutions, an impartial, independent rule of law, and a vibrant civil society. SDG16 makes clear that *to advance development*, States have the responsibility to guarantee and protect civic space and fundamental rights. "Leaving no one behind" is a human rights action plan that reaches across the whole spectrum of human rights.

He reiterated that human rights are, and must be, politically neutral. All States have accepted their responsibility to realize *all* rights.

He informed the Council about the year and a half of horrific warfare that has ravaged **Ukraine**, with a heart-wrenching toll on its people, and damage to vast areas of agricultural land. The Russian Federation's withdrawal from the **Black Sea Grain Initiative** in July, and attacks on grain facilities in Odesa and elsewhere, have again forced prices sky-high in many developing countries – taking the right to food far out of reach for many people.

He also reported violence and human rights violations in **Somalia, the Caribbean, Pakistan, Ethiopia, Lebanon, Cameroon, Pakistan, Peru, Haiti, Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, OPT, Iran, the Russian Federation and Niger**. None of the challenges faced by these countries can be addressed in isolation: they are interlinked.

The HC highlighted that In **Australia, a referendum will take place next month on constitutional recognition of the First Peoples of Australia, by establishing an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander**

**“voice” to Parliament. This is a historic opportunity to lay a new foundation for the inclusion and participation of Indigenous Peoples, for the benefit of all Australians.**

Considering the era of **massive concentration of wealth, and unprecedented inequalities**, he reported that in 2021, the richest 10% owned 76% of total wealth; the poorest half owned just 2%. And nearly half the world's people live in countries where governments must spend more on debt repayment than they are able to do on education or health. One important step must be the reform of the **international financial architecture**, including fairer deals on debt relief and development finance. He welcomed the current international discussions on reinforcing **international tax cooperation**, as well as the initiative led by **Colombia, Chile and Brazil** to promote progressive taxation and greater cooperation across Latin America and the Caribbean.

Taking decisive steps to **end corruption and illicit financial flows** is a powerful tool for raising revenue. He was also attentive to the need to counter the impunity of people and businesses who severely plunder our environment. An **international crime of ecocide** has been proposed for inclusion in the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court by a number of States and civil society groups.

Other issues considered by the HC were the **rights to affordable and quality food, water and sanitation, housing, education, healthcare, and social security**. In many countries, housing, for example, is treated as a commodity for speculative investment. A **crisis of affordable housing** squeezes family incomes; deepens inequalities; harms the health of children; impoverishes young people; and drives a growing crisis of homelessness. This is evident in many **European countries and in the United States**. In response to the situation within the EU, a European Platform on Combatting Homelessness was established in 2021 to help coordinate action by governments, cities and civil society. Similarly, in the USA, the new federal Strategic Plan to Prevent and End Homelessness is another signal of a new impetus to achieve corrective action. Ending homelessness and ensuring affordable housing are firmly embedded in the Sustainable Development Goals. They are also a human rights imperative.

In conclusion, he affirmed that at the SDG summit next week; at COP28, on climate change; and at the Summit of the Future, States need to pivot decisively towards fundamental changes. And as we approach our Human Rights 75 high-level event in December, he urged all Member States to make genuine commitments through transformative pledges.

The **Declaration on the Right to Development** sets out rights and duties on the part of States to forge development and related policies for the well-being of all. Operationalizing this right is essential, and the draft International Covenant on the Right to Development has been submitted to the Council at this session for further action. The human rights cause in all its facets has the potential to unify us, at a time when we urgently need to come together to confront the existential challenges that face humanity. This is ultimately about building trust and restoring hope, including through the work of this Council. All of us need to play our part.