

HUMAN RIGHTS COUNCIL – 55th SESSION

Opening of the Session

26 February 2024

President of the UN Human Rights Council – H.E. Mr. Omar Zniber

The President of the UN HRC called on the Council to observe a minute of silence in the memory of all **victims of human rights violations worldwide**. He stressed the Council's importance. The world needs to preserve both civil and political rights and economic, social, and cultural rights.

He expressed concern for food security and the climate crisis issues. They impacted the enjoyment of human rights throughout the world. New technologies such as artificial intelligence also had the potential to affect the human rights of the most vulnerable. The Council needed to pay due attention to these issues because it is **responsible for the promotion and protection of human rights**.

Mr. Zniber called on all stakeholders to contribute to this goal.

President of the 78th session of the General Assembly – H.E. Mr. Denis Francis

The President opened his speech by stating that 75 years after the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights – humanity's cherished Magna Carta – it is deeply concerning that human rights are under grave and increasing threat around the world. Conflicts and climate impacts have left a staggering 300 million people in dire need of humanitarian assistance, some 114 million of them being refugees and other displaced peoples. In the **Gaza Strip**, the suffering of innocent civilians has reached an unbearable **tipping point** – with over 90 percent of the population displaced, teetering on the brink of starvation, and trapped in the depths of an impending though avoidable public health catastrophe. The war in **Ukraine** has only grown more entrenched, with no foreseeable signs of cessation in the short term. **Haiti** has descended into lawlessness, while persistent violence across **Yemen, Sudan, Myanmar**, and elsewhere has exacerbated the human rights situation with deepening concern. In the **Sahel**, the impact of strife and environmental stressors has led to a resurgence of famine, jeopardizing the right to food and proper nutrition for millions.

As President of the General Assembly, stressed that the international community must not fail the victims of human rights violations. We must never tolerate or ignore the flagrant disregard for the rights and freedoms **our forebearers worked so arduously to define and codify. Nor should we ignore the systemic impunity with which it is perpetrated**. In the name of humanity, the United Nations must vehemently use our commanding platforms to speak up and to speak out in our demand for an **immediate humanitarian ceasefire** in the Gaza Strip and for the opening of corridors to render urgently needed assistance and care to the 1.5 million displaced and unhoused Palestinians. Across the globe, the inhumane brutality and suffering must stop.

Promoting upcoming events and conferences of the General Assembly, he affirmed that as a **gender** champion, he will continue to advocate for gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls. This attention is because of the continued setbacks in the recognition of and respect for the rights of women and girls. Harmful practices often rationalized in cultural terms and visited upon the female of our species – including child marriage and female genital mutilation, remain prevalent.

Meanwhile, women remain significantly underrepresented in positions of power and influence. Around the world we see them deprived of even the most basic rights – including the right to an education, with decisive consequences for themselves and society as a whole. While he welcomes recent news that a cohort of female secondary school graduates in **Afghanistan** will be “permitted” to attend medical school, such piecemeal steps fall far short of the progress that all Afghan women deserve; that is, their right to full and equal access to education, and full and equal participation in all spheres of community activity. Gender equality must be dealt with as a matter of moral urgency in Afghanistan and elsewhere. **We cannot meaningfully achieve the SDGs and close the inequality gap between North and South while effectively marginalizing half of humanity from actively participating in all spheres of economic, political, and social activity.**

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

The Secretary-General opened his remarks by considering that human rights as the bedrock of peace, are under attack. Conflicts are taking a terrible toll as parties to war trample on human rights and humanitarian law. At the local level and online, many communities are riven with violent rhetoric, discrimination, and hate speech. Our world is becoming less safe by the day. As powers compete, tensions rise and the rule of law, and the rules of war, are being undermined. **From Ukraine to Sudan to Myanmar, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and Gaza**, parties to conflict are turning a blind eye to international law, the Geneva Conventions, and even the United Nations Charter. The Security Council is often deadlocked, unable to act on the most significant peace and security issues of our time. **The Council’s lack of unity on Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, and on Israel’s military operations in Gaza** following the horrific terror attacks by Hamas on 7 October, has severely undermined its authority. The Council needs serious reform to its composition and working methods.

Nothing can justify [Hamas’s] deliberate killing, injuring, torturing, and kidnapping of civilians, the use of sexual violence – or the indiscriminate launching of rockets towards Israel. But nothing justifies the collective punishment of the Palestinian people. Invoking *Article 99* for the first time in my mandate, to put the greatest possible pressure on the Council to do everything in its power to end the bloodshed in Gaza and prevent escalation; it was not enough. International Humanitarian Law remains under attack. **He repeated the call for a humanitarian ceasefire and the immediate and unconditional release of all hostages.**

He affirmed that around the world, violence is increasing, and conflict-related human rights violations are spreading. In particular, under **International human rights and humanitarian laws** all parties must distinguish between civilians and combatants at all times; attacks on civilians or protected infrastructure, including schools and hospitals, are prohibited; indiscriminate attacks are prohibited; attacks, where the likelihood of civilian death is disproportionate to the probable military advantage, are prohibited; forced displacement is prohibited; taking and holding of hostages is prohibited; the use of civilians as human shields is prohibited; collective punishment is prohibited; the use of sexual violence as a weapon of war is prohibited; among others.

He further stressed the urgent need for a new commitment to all human rights – civil, cultural, economic, political, and social – as they apply to peace and security, backed by serious efforts at implementation and accountability. States have the primary responsibility to protect and promote human rights. To support states, he is launching a system-wide **United Nations Agenda for Protection**, together with the High Commissioner for Human Rights. Under this Agenda, the UN will act as one to prevent human rights violations and to identify and respond to them when they take place.

Moreover, the **Summit of the Future** in September is our opportunity for such a re-commitment. It will consider deep reforms to make global financial frameworks more inclusive, equitable, and just,

so they can support governments in prioritizing social spending, sustainable development, and climate action, essential to human rights. The **New Agenda for Peace**, to be discussed at the Summit, applies a human rights lens to preventing and ending violence in all its forms. The New Agenda, among others, urges security policies centered on people, with the full and equal participation of women, and the strong representation of young people. It calls for human rights to be at the heart of the governance of new weapons technologies, including artificial intelligence, and seeks the total prohibition of lethal autonomous weapons with the power to kill without human involvement. As well as the New Agenda for Peace also addresses the links between human rights violations and violence at the community level. This includes violence against women and girls, activities of criminal gangs, antisemitism, anti-Muslim bigotry, the persecution of minority Christian communities, and discrimination against minorities of all kinds, many people do not feel safe in their communities.

Finally, he affirmed that the crises assaulting our planet, namely climate change, biodiversity loss, and pollution, have a massive injustice at their core. The global financial architecture is at the heart of this human rights emergency.

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

Mr Turk opened the 55th session of the Human Rights Council affirming that the Council enters session at a time of seismic global shocks. **Conflicts** are battering the lives of millions of civilians and carving even deeper fault lines across and between nations. The pain and the slaughter of so many people in the **Middle East, Ukraine, Sudan, Myanmar, Haiti and so many other places** around the world are unbearable.

He was pleased to launch "[Human Rights: A Path for Solutions](#)", the distillation of the work that has gone into our commemoration year, in the hope that it will inform the Summit of the Future. It sets out eight messages to guide renewed action for peace; economies that work for people and the planet; effective governance; and guardrails for digital and scientific progress. It broadens the way we think about rights, in ways that can transform societies and our global community. The Secretary-General's announcement of the UN's **Protection Pledge**, and the **Agenda for Protection**, will ensure that the entire UN gives priority to advancing human rights in every circumstance, no matter how challenging. I look forward to working with colleagues across the UN to implement this Pledge.

Further, he flagged two overarching concerns that have a potential impact on all countries. *First*, negotiations on treaties on **pandemic prevention** and on **cybercrime**, as well as on **plastic pollution**; and global discussions about the regulation of **artificial intelligence** – all these talks are currently underway, but they are not sufficiently taking into account human rights obligations and the human rights harms that could be done. *Second*, the attempts to **undermine the legitimacy and work of the United Nations** and other institutions. They include disinformation that targets UN humanitarian organizations, UN peacekeepers, and my Office. The UN has become a lightning rod for manipulative propaganda and a scapegoat for policy failures. This is profoundly destructive of the common good, and it callously betrays the many people whose lives rely on it. The UN is uniquely equipped to enable States to discuss and resolve pressing global issues. This convening power is particularly vital now when the magnitude of conflict, planetary peril, and digital transformation requires urgent solutions.

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

The Chief of the Federal Department of Foreign Affairs of Switzerland, among the more than 50 open conflicts in the world, focused on the war in **Ukraine**, which entered its third year; the conflict in the **Middle East** which seemed more than ever to be at an impasse; and the current crisis in **Sudan**

which had thrown nearly eight million people onto the roads. He reported that according to Sweden's Varieties of Democracy Institute, more than 70 percent of the world's population now live in autocracies. Democracy had regressed to the level of the mid-1980s. The international community had a responsibility to stop this negative dynamic.

If human rights were respected everywhere, there would not be constant talk of war. Despite all the laws enacted, efforts did not seem to have succeeded in making reason triumph over violence. This year, 2024, is an important test for democracy: elections were scheduled in more than 64 countries.

Many citizens would be called upon to make use of their right to information, freedom of speech, and the possibility of peaceful assembly. The United Nations must ensure the protection of civic space and fair and free elections. Harassment and targeted attacks aimed at shrinking essential democratic space needed to be combatted. These engaging words needed to be followed by concrete and lasting action, which was why everyone was gathered in Geneva. He affirmed that **this year, Switzerland is applying to become a member of the Council**. Building on the Swiss tradition of accountability to humanitarian law and human rights, the country aspired to be more responsive to the challenges of these turbulent times.

Finally, considering the **75th anniversary of the Geneva Conventions** and the current situation worldwide, he stressed the urgent need to act together.