

HUMAN RIGHTS COUNCIL – 55th SESSION

Oral Update by the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights

04 March 2024

In his oral update, **Mr. Volker Türk, United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights**, begun presenting annual reports on Colombia, Guatemala, and Honduras.

Concerning **Colombia**, despite the significant strides in addressing human rights challenges in 2023, many pressing issues persist. **Non-state armed groups and criminal organisations continue to expand their control over lands and communities**, with serious impacts on human rights. High levels of violence are disproportionately affecting rural communities, Indigenous and Afro-descendant peoples, and their leaders. Such levels of violence require increased civilian protection efforts by the Government. He urged the Government to do its utmost to expand and maintain a comprehensive State presence throughout the whole country. He also reiterated the UN Security Council's call that **the 2016 peace agreement remain central to the Government's peace policy today**.

Moreover, the HC affirmed that despite the challenges, Colombia has made concrete commitments and taken action to progress on human rights. In particular, the Government adopted public policies on dismantle criminal groups and their support networks; human security; and on drug.

Finally, the OHCHR will continue advocating for a **more effective system to protect human rights defenders and will support integration of human rights approaches into the security sector**. In light of this, he urged Colombia's Attorney General's Office to advance towards ensuring accountabilities for all human rights violations and abuses.

Concerning **Guatemala**, the HC reported a substantial rise in attacks and reprisals against justice officials investigating cases of corruption and serious human rights violations in 2023, as well as a deterioration of systemic and structural inequalities and discrimination, particularly affecting Indigenous Peoples and people of African Descent. His report raised serious concerns on attacks against human rights defenders, journalists and Indigenous authorities, urging for the adoption of a stronger public policy to protect them.

Noting and welcoming the advances made in some emblematic cases of violations of human rights committed during the internal armed conflict, he reported concern over the proposed legal initiative to extinguish criminal liability for people accused and convicted of international crimes committed during the conflict.

The report on **Honduras** highlighted challenges by several longstanding structural obstacles to the enjoyment of human rights. **Persistent violence, including gender violence, land conflicts and impunity** are emblematic of some of the country's most acute human rights issues. While he noted a reduction in homicides; violence and insecurity remain deep-rooted and commonplace, particularly impacting women and LGBTQ+ people. For the State to be able to ensure a safe environment, free from organized crime, it requires the resources and policies necessary to address the massive inequalities in the country, illicit financial flows, taxation and corruption. It is also important to develop a coherent national security policy grounded in human rights that incorporates prevention measures.

He raised concern about the increased militarization of public security and the penitentiary system.

He said was very troubled by the fact that Honduras remains one of the world's most dangerous countries for people who defend land, territory and the environment. Attacks against human rights defenders and journalists increased last year.

Among other reforms, the HC welcomed the repeal and amendment of decrees by the Congress, part of the so-called “Impunity Pact,” as well as the willingness of the Government to address corruption. However, high levels of corruption and impunity continue to deplete the resources available to the country, as well as to erode trust in public institutions.

Considering the report on **Nicaragua**, Mr. Volker Türk affirmed that the human rights situation continues to plummet at an alarming pace. For almost six years now, a systematic campaign of repression has targeted anti-Government protestors, human rights defenders, journalists, and politicians. Violations have been particularly severe against women, LGBTQ+ activists and women political leaders. Most recently, the Catholic Church and other religious groups have come under attack, in a disturbing symbol of the ruling party’s efforts to consolidate its control across all spheres of society and to crackdown on any independent voice.

Throughout the country, the authorities continue arbitrarily to detain people for political reasons. The OHCHR has documented physical torture against some of these individuals, as well as multiple violations of their right to due process. The Nicaraguan authorities now exercise almost total control over the judicial system, which has long lost any semblance of independence. Testimonies received highlighted a climate of intense fear, intimidation and harassment. The authorities in Nicaragua continue to refuse cooperation with my Office or any of the international human rights mechanisms.

Member States of the Council can and must do more to support Nicaragua to change course and avert an even deeper human rights crisis. He suggested a few actions, including provide full backing and protection to Nicaraguan human rights defenders; strengthen accountability for alleged international crimes and other violations of international law committed since 2018, as well as to promote the appropriate application of universal and extraterritorial jurisdiction; and ensure international refugee protection to Nicaraguans fleeing persecution and strictly to uphold the principle of non-refoulement.

Turning on the report on **Cyprus**, the HC affirmed that the persisting division of Cyprus continues to obstruct the full enjoyment of human rights by all people across the island. The Turkish Cypriot community continues to be disproportionately affected by discrimination, including at the crossing points between the southern and northern parts of Cyprus. The socioeconomic disparity between the Turkish Cypriot community and the Greek Cypriot community continues to grow, with the Turkish Cypriot community more deeply impacted.

He stressed that **peace education** is key. Education reform should be reinvigorated.

Despite the challenges, he informed on the ongoing **efforts to advance human rights for all people in Cyprus**. Religious actors have led joint efforts to protect the rights of refugees, asylum-seekers, and unaccompanied minors. He urged all parties to ensure that a human rights-based approach underpins their mutual dialogue and cooperation, including with regard to the work of the bicomunal technical committees. Working towards trust, social cohesion and the realization of human rights for all will be essential to supporting and advancing renewed efforts to achieve a just, sustainable and peaceful solution to the island’s ongoing division.

The HC concluded the oral presentation with the **Sri Lanka’s** report. Despite the Government’s important steps to stabilize the economy, he expressed concern by the introduction of new or proposed laws with potentially far-reaching impact on fundamental rights and freedoms, the rule of law and democratic governance.

He affirmed that meanwhile, the disastrous consequences of Sri Lanka's economic crisis continue to bite deeply, particularly for the most marginalised. Social protection remains overstretched, and the government's largest budget expenditure this year will go towards servicing its debt.

15 Years since the end of a decades-long civil war, violations of human rights remain unaddressed. Tens of thousands of families of the disappeared are still looking for their loved ones and face intimidation, arrests and violence in their search. Land disputes continue to escalate in the north and east of the country impacting on people's livelihoods. Provincial Councils and local government bodies, that promised a measure of devolution, are not currently constituted. While the Government has introduced a draft legislation for a Commission for Truth, Unity and Reconciliation, the environment for a credible truth-seeking process remains absent. The OCHRC continues to receive allegations of surveillance, harassment and arrests by security forces of civil society representatives, journalists and victims, as well as of people who have been involved in organising commemoration events for war victims.

He urged the Government immediately to reverse this trend and undertake credible accountability measures to investigate and prosecute past and present human rights violations and economic crimes. He urged Member States to continue to reinforce these efforts. It is only through addressing the root causes of the country's conflict and economic crisis, and ensuring accountability, that Sri Lanka will be able to enhance its prospects of achieving genuine reconciliation and sustainable peace and development.

Colombia (Concerned Country): was aware of the great challenges that persist to guarantee human rights in the country, including violence in the territories against leaders and human rights defenders. The Government of President Gustavo Petro works decisively to eradicate it through its Total Peace policy, whose fruits, still insufficient, must grow and contribute to the enjoyment of rights in our country. It informed the Council that the **National Commission for Security Guarantees that approved the policy** of dismantling criminal organizations and structures that attack communities, human rights defenders and peace signatories. This policy seeks to dismantle all the factors that generate violence.

An issue that is transversally related to this situation is the drug trafficking. The Government has proposed to the International Community to adopt a new approach that puts the rights of people, communities and sectors of the population most affected by the drug phenomenon at the center. Colombia adopted a **new drug policy**, which prioritizes health, development and environmental care in the territories with the greatest presence of drug crops and contemplates police and military actions to attack the highest links in the drug trafficking chain.

It stated that **access to justice** is essential to advance the guarantee of human rights, especially of the most vulnerable. Colombia is determined to become a society that coexists in peace, and where sociopolitical violence, social exclusion and impunity are overcome. May violence, abuse and injustice be duly repaired and left in the past.

Guatemala (Concerned Country): welcomed the assessment that the HC made regarding the progress achieved by the Ministry of Energy and Mines and the indigenous peoples, in relation to the consultations ordered by the Constitutional Court regarding mining and hydroelectric projects. I recognized the importance of the technical assistance of the Office, provided to the Ministry of Public

Health and Social Assistance, for strengthening the capacities of the health personnel who will make up the Evaluation Boards in charge of the certification process for people with disabilities.

It informed that currently, the Presidential Commission for Peace and Human Rights, the governing institution in the matter, is working on the preparation of the Baseline of the National Action Plan for Business and Human Rights. Moreover, the State is moving towards a process of national reconciliation, with the commitment to recover the historical memory of the victims of the Internal Armed Conflict.

Honduras (Concerned Country): emphasized and highlighted significant challenges of the country due to the aftermath of the 2009 Coup d'état and the anti-democratic interests that have persisted since then and still have an impact on the governance of our country. The lack of attention to the structural causes of inequality, poverty and violence by previous governments, as well as an unjust and environmentally destructive economic development model, aggravate the situation. This situation hinders State capabilities to fully guarantee all human rights.

Moreover, in April 2023, the draft Tax Justice Law was presented to the National Congress, intended to eliminate public-private corruption, reflected in the tax exemptions that no longer represented a real benefit for the economic situation of the country. The Country approved the legislative decree that **prohibits the concession of protected areas and micro-basins that supply water for mining projects.**

It reiterated the important collaboration of the HC for the strengthening of state capacities in the field of human rights.

Nicaragua (Concerned Country): reaffirmed that the country does not accept manipulation of these fora to flaunt reports prepared with supposed objectivity or common sense justifying these with a clear lack of concern for our state when in reality the manipulation continues with the single goal of intervening in the internal affairs of our country. These oral updates **violate** the non-intervention principle under which the standards of international law are nonnegotiable and cannot be discussed where the sovereign decisions of the state are concerned, and this affects the country and people. These are absolute inalienable and no prescriptible.

It reiterated that **any interference in the policies and decisions of Nicaragua represents a malicious act** by those who use for these oral updates inputs from certain minority groups financed in order to discredit the progress made by the Government and people.

May this statement serve once more to **denounce** the lack of integrity and morality of these mechanisms which are supposed to promote respect, tolerance and peaceful coexistence of nations guaranteeing the sovereign right of peoples to live in dignity and independence and continue developing their own destiny seeking social peace, economic culture and social development and guaranteeing the well-being and the genuine human rights that Nicaragua's families deserve.

Cyprus (Concerned Country): affirmed that human rights violations against Cypriots endure to this day. These violations do not exist in a vacuum but are rather the direct repercussions of Turkey's 1974 military invasion and persistent occupation. Cyprus remains steadfast in its support of the OHCHR mandate.

Sri Lanka (Concerned Country): provided more details on the progress made on matters of relevance to this Council. The Government, to overcome the challenges of the recent past, prioritized economic recovery and reconciliation objectives, while ensuring that the country's democratic traditions and institutions remained stable at all times. Despite severe constraints, the objectives of Sri Lanka remain

steadfast and unwavering towards expediting the ongoing efforts for strengthening the foundation of national unity, post-conflict reconciliation and human rights. Consultations on the draft **Truth, Unity and Reconciliation Commission bill** are ongoing with the participation of Government, civil society, religious leaders and legal experts.

The Country reported progresses and work of the National Offices, including the Office on Missing Persons, the Office for Reparations, the Office for Overseas Sri Lankan Affairs, and the Office for National Unity and Reconciliation.

Finally, Sri Lanka reiterated its categorical **rejection of Resolutions 46/1 and 51/1 and the external evidence gathering mechanism**. Both of these resolutions, that do not have the consent of the country concerned, have wide-ranging legal and political implications for all countries.

It cannot condone the continuing **double standards** of some sectors that provides no tangible relief to the grievances of people but only contributes to the politicization of human rights. Sri Lanka will **continue to engage constructively with the UN** and its agencies, in keeping with domestic priorities and policies as well as the international obligations voluntarily undertaken.

Mr. Volker Türk, United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, continued his oral update focusing on the scourge of war and the imperative of peace; and on the open space that is needed for societies to flourish – particularly in this mega election year.

Concerning the first topic, he reported that **around the world, 55 conflicts are flaring**. Widespread violations of international humanitarian and human rights law are generating devastating impact on millions of civilians. Displacement and humanitarian crises have already reached an unprecedented scale. And all of these conflicts have regional and global impact.

He listed a few: the war in **Gaza** has explosive impact across the Middle East and a dangerous spillover in neighbouring countries. The military escalation in southern **Lebanon** between Israel, Hezbollah and other armed groups is extremely worrying. Conflicts in the **Horn of Africa, Sudan and the Sahel** could also escalate sharply. Increasing militarisation on the **Korean Peninsula** raises threat levels. The deteriorating security crisis in the eastern provinces of the **Democratic Republic of the Congo** is alarming. In the **Red Sea**, as well as the **Black Sea**, attacks are creating shockwaves for the global transport of goods, adding to the economic pain inflicted on less developed countries. The situations in **Myanmar and Sudan**, where internal armed conflicts, characterised by atrocity crimes, are leading to tens of thousands of deaths, the displacement of over 11 million people, and uncontrolled humanitarian crisis.

In **Syria**, where there is still no clear path to a just and sustainable peace, conflict is once again escalating, 13 years after the onset of the catastrophic civil war, which was marked by horrific human rights violations and abuses. The Secretary-General set up an independent institution dedicated to missing persons in Syria, which will pave the way for victims, survivors and their families' right to the truth. In **Ukraine**, two years after the Russian Federation's full-scale invasion, instead of progress towards a sustainable peace, hostilities have again recently escalated, with Russian missile and drone attacks leading to a steep increase in civilian casualties across Ukraine.

He also mentioned the current worrying situations of human rights resulting from hostilities in **Yemen, Ethiopia, Mali, Burkina Faso, Armenia and Azerbaijan, in the Western Balkans region (Serbia, Kosovo**

and Bosnia and Herzegovina), and in the Latin America and the Caribbean (Ecuador, Haiti, Honduras and Mexico).

Reminding that a meaningful, safe and fully participatory electoral process is key to ensuring that governance serves the people's human rights; affirmed that three-quarters of the world's members of Parliament are men. He urged all States to do more to combat gender discrimination and violence against women, and to dismantle the webs of **laws and practices that keep women out of power**. Good governance requires constant oversight and accountability, **via independent checks and balances to the exercise of power**, meaning that it is strongly underpinned by the rule of law, including independent justice systems. Fundamental freedoms – the rights to freedom of opinion, expression, peaceful assembly and association – are also essential.

He stressed that **corruption** is a major challenge to democracy and rights. However, he was also concerned by the prospect of intense disinformation campaigns in the context of elections, fuelled by **generative artificial intelligence**.

In many cases, this year's electoral processes will ensure a smooth transfer of power, free of hatred; and that the governance structures that result will broadly achieve their main function of representing the many voices of the people, and advancing their rights. But in other cases, the human rights context, in which several elections are taking place, are at risk. In this vein, the HC mentioned situations in the **Russian Federation, Iran, Chad, Senegal, Ghana, Rwanda, Somalia, Libya, India, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Mexico, Poland, and the US**.

In conclusion, the HC reported the continuing and systematic violations of human rights in **Afghanistan** in terms of violations of the rights of women and girls; in the **United Arab Emirates** in term of civil space and media freedoms, and counter-terrorism legislation; and in **China** in areas such as counterterrorism policies, gender equality, minority protection, civic space, and economic, social and cultural rights. He pointed out that many States need to adopt comprehensive measures to combat police violence and discrimination, including **European countries, the US and Brazil**. He was concerned about the **so-called "great replacement" conspiracy theories**, based on the false notion that Jews, Muslims, non-white people and migrants seek to "replace" or suppress countries' cultures and peoples.

Deploring escalating attacks against LGBTQI+ people and their rights in **Belarus, Burkina Faso, Ghana, Lebanon, Niger, Nigeria, the Russian Federation, Uganda**, several states within the **United States of America**, and in **Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, among others**; he commended important steps and progresses in **Antigua and Barbuda, Barbados, Mauritius, Saint Kitts and Nevis and Singapore**.

Mr. Volker Türk concluded affirming that peace, like development, is built and nourished through rights, including the right to development and the right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment. History is a record of humanity's capacity to surmount the worst challenges. Among the greatest achievements of humanity over the past 75 years has been the recognition that addressing human rights in every country – all human rights; it is not an à la carte menu – is a matter of international concern.

To watch the full meeting refer to UN Web TV [Part 1](#) and [Part 2](#).