

HUMAN RIGHTS COUNCIL – 56th SESSION

Opening of the Session

18 June 2024

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

The President of the UN HRC opened the fifty-sixth regular session. He welcomed the generous support of donors to the Voluntary Technical Assistance Trust Fund, which supported the participation of least-developed countries and small island developing States in the work of the Council.

He mentioned the upcoming **high-level informal Presidential discussion on the link between climate change, food security and health security, and their impact on the enjoyment of human rights.**

A constructive, safe and respectful atmosphere was essential for the Council's sessions, however, the Council's mandate holders were sometimes subjected to personal attacks or threats in the course of their work. The President would support them against any inappropriate attack. Similarly, the active participation of representatives of civil society and national human rights institutions was an essential component of the Human Rights Council. As President, he would follow up on all reported allegations of reprisals and intimidation, committed against individuals or groups, who had cooperated with the Council and its mechanisms. He called on everyone to take all necessary steps to prevent such acts from taking place in the first place and to ensure that they were promptly and seriously addressed in case they did occur.

The Council had a zero tolerance for any form of harassment, including sexual harassment. The Director-General of the United Nations Office at Geneva had pledged to implement the "Code of Conduct to prevent harassment, including sexual harassment, at United Nations system events".

High Commissioner of the Human Rights Council – H.E. Mr Volker Turk

The High Commissioner addressed the Council with his Global Update. He reported that since March 2024, conflicts have only intensified; killings and injuries of civilians have become a daily occurrence; destruction of vital infrastructure is a daily occurrence; children are shot at; hospitals are bombed, and heavy artillery is launched on entire communities.

In 2023, data gathered by the Office shows the number of civilian deaths in armed conflict soared by 72 percent. Horrifyingly, the data indicates that the proportion of women killed in 2023 doubled, and that of children tripled, compared to the year prior.

The HC informed about the human rights challenges and humanitarian situation of a few countries, including **Haiti, Malawi, Zambia, Zimbabwe, Sri Lanka, Lao People's Democratic Republic, Laos, Malaysia, Argentina, Brazil, Colombia, USA and the EU, Islamic Republic of Iran, Guatemala, Peru, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Yemen, Mexico, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Georgia, India, Kyrgyzstan, the Russian Federation, Slovakia, and Türkiye.** He also reported good practices and some developments observed in **Kazakhstan, South Africa, Thailand, Bhutan, Côte d'Ivoire, the Republic of Congo, South Sudan, Tuvalu, Morocco, Paraguay, and Portugal** that have fulfilled their Human Rights 75 ratification pledges. These pledges were made to advance economic, social, and cultural rights, the right to development, the right to a clean, healthy, and sustainable environment, and civil and political rights.

A number of countries advanced new bills or reformed their comprehensive anti-discrimination laws, in line with their Human Rights 75 pledges. **Dominica and Saint Lucia** adopted legislation against gender-based violence.

He was appalled by the disregard for international human rights and humanitarian law by parties to the conflict in **Gaza**. There has been unconscionable death and suffering. More than 120,000 people in Gaza, overwhelmingly women and children, have been killed or injured since 7 October, as a result of the intensive Israeli offensives. Since Israel escalated its operations into Rafah in early May, almost one million Palestinians have been forcibly displaced yet again, while aid delivery and humanitarian access deteriorated further. The situation in the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, is dramatically deteriorating. As of 15 June, 528 Palestinians, 133 of them children, had been killed by Israeli security forces and/or settlers since October, in many cases raising serious concerns of unlawful killings. In the same period, 23 Israelis have been killed in the West Bank and Israel in clashes with or attacks by Palestinians, including 8 members of Israeli security forces.

Israel's relentless strikes in Gaza are causing immense suffering and widespread destruction. The arbitrary denial and obstruction of humanitarian aid have continued, and Israel continues to detain arbitrarily thousands of Palestinians. This must end. Palestinian armed groups continue to hold many hostages, and, in some cases in densely populated areas, putting them and Palestinian civilians at further risk. These hostages must be released.

The situation in **Ukraine** continues to deteriorate. The recent ground offensive by Russian armed forces into Ukraine's Kharkiv region has destroyed entire communities. Residents, many of them older people, hid in basements, without electricity, water, or adequate food, as the area came under intense attacks by explosive weapons with wide area effects. Repeated waves of large-scale attacks on energy infrastructure have destroyed 68 percent of Ukraine's electricity production capacity, bringing the system to a dangerous tipping point, especially ahead of winter.

Sudan is being destroyed in front of our eyes by two warring parties and affiliated groups. They have stoked inter-ethnic tensions, denied humanitarian assistance, arrested human rights defenders, and flagrantly cast aside the rights of their people. I put both Generals on notice for their responsibility in the commission of possible war crimes and other atrocity crimes, including through sexual violence and ethnically motivated attacks. They are ultimately responsible for the impact of their actions on civilians, including massive displacement, impending famine, and an intensifying humanitarian disaster. It is vital that ongoing mediation efforts, including by the African Union, bring this conflict to an end. Existing civilian initiatives to influence a future transition also need support. These processes must be inclusive, to address the conflict's causes rooted in exclusion and discrimination.

Considering the situation in the **Democratic Republic of Congo**, he reported the suffering of civilians living in camps for internally displaced people with continued attacks by armed groups, including the M23, the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF), CODECO, and others. He called for an end to the violence. The Government, and regional and international actors, must focus on bringing about peace, security, and trust. Hate speech and messages targeting people based on their ethnicity must stop and the perpetrators brought to justice. The private sector, including businesses that extract resources, must also assume their responsibilities.

While there is a decrease in the intensity of hostilities in the **Syrian Arab Republic** compared to past years, there is no apparent end in sight to the conflict. With ongoing killings of civilians, destruction of civilian objects, sexual and gender-based violence, and arbitrary arrests and intimidation of peaceful protesters. Deaths in custody, particularly in areas under the control of pro-government forces,

persist. Syrian returnees continue to face risks, such as arbitrary arrest detention, and extortion, both in areas under the control of pro-government forces and in areas controlled by non-State armed groups.

South Sudan is a country exhausted by inter-communal violence and revenge killings, widespread attacks on civilians, extrajudicial executions, conflict-related sexual violence, mismanagement of resources, food insecurity, and large-scale displacement, including due to environmental factors. All these challenges are exacerbated in a fragile pre-electoral context. The HC urged the Government to prioritize accountability, address localized violence, enhance the protection of civilians, investigate all alleged violations, and bring perpetrators to justice.

The far-reaching impact of war and conflict on the environment is also undeniable. This comes on top of some of the biggest challenges humanity faces today — climate change, biodiversity loss, and pollution.

Like most crises, the climate emergency disproportionately affects the world's poor and most marginalized. Countries and communities who have contributed the least to creating it, suffer its effects the most – notably in small island developing States, least developed countries, and landlocked developing countries. Climate disasters often collide with pre-existing challenges, such as food insecurity and structural discrimination, together with limited resources due to unsustainable debt levels, lack of fiscal space for public spending, and barriers to accessing concessional financing. The adverse effects of climate change are already having massive impacts on the enjoyment of human rights. By integrating human rights into environmental analysis and modeling, the international community may anticipate the types of issues that will arise, inform decision-making, and minimize the worst impacts. Seeking accountability for environmental harm, including through appropriate use of criminal law, will help make the right to a clean, healthy, and sustainable environment a reality on the ground.

The High Commissioner, further, explained the meaning of human rights, as the best tool for early warning and prevention. This means that the international community must take the drivers and root causes of tensions, violence, and conflict seriously, including entrenched inequalities; lack of access to basic rights – food, water, housing, education, decent work, a clean, healthy, and sustainable environment; systemic discrimination; deficient governance and the quashing of dissenting voices.

Globally, inequality has seen the largest increase in three decades, as poorer countries took a bigger economic hit from the COVID-19 pandemic compared to richer countries.

Another concern raised by the HC was related to **the human rights economy**, a lever for social justice. It promotes equal opportunities, meaningful participation, and investment in essential services. It helps forge trust in public institutions, fostering the social contract. Globally, the economic systems – from trade treaties to investment agreements, business regulation to development frameworks – must be in line with human rights, including the right to development. This also has consequences for the reform of the international financial architecture.

Systemic racism against people of African descent is perpetuated by systems and structures that are rooted in the legacies of colonialism and enslavement.

Tragically, he affirmed that pushbacks on the **rights of women and girls** continue. Active resistance to gender equality is a key factor in slowing progress – even reversing gains made – in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals.

In this vein, the HC deplored the ongoing systemic persecution of women and girls in **Afghanistan**, particularly regarding their rights to education, employment, and freedom of movement. More broadly, human rights defenders and media workers continue to be arbitrarily arrested and detained for expressing opinions perceived as critical of the de facto authorities. The use of corporal punishment, including mass floggings, persists, in violation of international law. Attacks by armed groups against civilians, particularly targeting the Hazara community, continue.

In general terms, no countries are immune from regression in women's rights. Everyone must be vigilant and steadfast in countering this pushback.

Considering the human rights issues in **China**, the HC reported serious concerns observed in the Xinjiang region. Among other things, the HC stressed the problematic provisions in China's counterterrorism and criminal laws, as well as the application of national security laws in Hong Kong. He deplored the heavy sentences given last week to a women's rights activist and a labor rights activist for exercising their fundamental human rights.

In closing, he flagged one overarching concern. Any form of **hate speech** is unacceptable, dangerous for social cohesion, and a harbinger of worse to come. There are increasingly aggressive verbal attacks, threats and reprisals, and virulent social media campaigns against international institutions and mechanisms, including the United Nations generally, the Office, Special Procedures mandate holders, the International Court of Justice, and the International Criminal Court. This is unacceptable. These institutions were set up and mandated by States precisely to undertake their crucial work — States must facilitate this work and protect it from undue interference and attack.

Focusing on the Pact for the Future, the HC urged all States to ensure that our common commitment to human rights is reflected powerfully – and concretely – in the Summit's outcomes. A strong and effective human rights system is key to effective multilateral cooperation, and to building a better future for people and the planet.