

HUMAN RIGHTS COUNCIL – 57th SESSION

Opening of the Session

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

In his global update, the High Commissioner Mr Volker Turk, informed the Council of broader reflections about the state of human rights. He affirmed that human rights are not in crisis, but political leadership is needed to make them a reality. In every region around the world, we see deep-seated power dynamics at play to grab or hold on to power, at the expense of universal human rights. In particular, the international community is seeing alarming regressions on gender equality issues. At their most extreme, for example in **Afghanistan**, despicable laws and policies are effectively erasing women from public life. Women experience higher poverty rates than men in most parts of the world. Gender-based violence, including intimate partner violence, is devastatingly frequent and remains largely hidden. Justice for victims and prevention efforts are woefully inadequate.

Racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia, and related intolerance continue to plague societies, propped up by entrenched power structures, vested interests, institutional inertia, and harmful stereotypes, often rooted in legacies of colonialism and enslavement. Despite some progress, it remains uneven and insufficient. In far too many States, across all regions, we see, as a result, deepening socio-economic inequalities. There are those politicians, amplified by some media outlets, who scapegoat migrants, refugees, and minorities, as we have seen, for example, around electoral periods in **Austria, France, Germany, Hungary, the United Kingdom, and the United States of America**, to name a few.

Despite the significant global shift towards decriminalization of consensual same-sex relations, in some countries, such as **Ghana, Indonesia, Iraq, and Uganda** discrimination laws and criminal sanctions remain. Such policies harm societies as a whole. On the death penalty, the overall positive trend towards its abolition worldwide is marred by a substantial increase in executions in a limited number of States, such as the **Islamic Republic of Iran**, particularly for drug-related crimes, but also **Saudia Arabia**. Freedoms of expression, assembly and association, and a free press, including in electoral contexts are crucial for critical debate, to find solutions to the manifold problems we face. Examples include the detention of journalists in **Azerbaijan**; arrests, detention, and harassment of political opponents in **Mali, Uganda, and Venezuela**; arrests and detention of political opponents and activists in **Tunisia**; persecution of political opponents and journalists in **Nicaragua**; and crackdowns on activists in **Viet Nam**. In **China**, undue restrictions on civic space continue to be imposed in the name of national security and social stability.

The HC affirmed further that ‘State capture’ in its various forms is an abuse of power, with serious consequences for human rights. Powerful economic and political actors take control of what should be independent State institutions, such as the judiciary or electoral commissions. They silence critical voices and plunder resources purely for their own political and financial gain. He urged all voters to keep in mind the issues that matter most to them – be it a home, education for their children, their health or job, justice, their family and loved ones, the environment, being free from violence, tackling corruption, being heard; and whether the political platforms or candidates will work for the human rights of everyone.

He highlighted about the newer forms of power, wielded on peoples’ lives and on our ‘global public square’ through improperly or insufficiently regulated digital technologies, including the wholesale exploitation of data. Human rights, including free expression and privacy, must be protected, and

digital technologies must be regulated, while helping ensure that online violence, disinformation, hate speech and incitement to hatred are stopped in their tracks. We must actively ensure that the benefits of digital technologies and artificial intelligence are accessible to those most in need, to help reduce global inequalities and close digital divides. The Global Digital Compact therefore needs to be anchored firmly in the normative human rights framework.

75 years ago, States adopted the four Geneva Conventions, elaborating on laws of war that they agreed to uphold, in the wake of the horrors and devastation of two world wars. Almost 80 years ago, States adopted the UN Charter, promising to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war. The HC concluded by underscoring the current situations in **Sudan, Gaza, Israel, Ukraine, Myanmar, and Yemen. In particular, Sudan** is experiencing one of the world's worst humanitarian and protection crises, fueled by longstanding impunity, a firestorm of zero-sum power struggles, competing economic interests, and instrumentalization of ethnic tensions. Estimates suggest that over 20,000 people have been killed. the horrific 7 October attacks claimed the lives of over 1,200 victims in **Israel** and injured many others, over 40,000 Palestinians have been killed by Israeli forces, several thousand injured, and thousands remain under the rubble in **Gaza**. Each day, Palestinians struggle to survive. Nearly 1.9 million people have been forcibly displaced across the strip, many multiple times. Ending that war and averting a full-blown regional conflict is an absolute and urgent priority. Equally, the wider situation of illegality across the occupied Palestinian territory deriving from Israel's policies and practices, as so clearly spelled out by the International Court of Justice in its Advisory Opinion in July, must be comprehensively addressed. States must not accept blatant disregard for international law, including binding decisions of the Security Council and orders of the International Court of Justice, neither in this nor any other situation. In **Ukraine**, civilians are trapped in cycles of terror, through ongoing attacks by the **Russian Federation** striking civilian facilities like hospitals, schools, and supermarkets, and repeated waves of targeting of energy infrastructure leading to country-wide blackouts. **Myanmar's** crisis continues to plumb the depths of inhumanity, with recent air strikes, mass arrests and reports of extrajudicial killings continuing unabated, amidst stifling impunity. Civilians are paying the heaviest price, with some of the highest numbers of civilian casualties being reported since the current crisis began in 2021, and the Rohingya community violently cornered in northern Rakhine State, with nowhere safe to turn.

Finally, he affirmed that States have designed international human rights and humanitarian law to preserve and guarantee common humanity. These norms are the mainstay against unbridled power. All parties to conflicts and other States, particularly those with influence, must do everything they can to put an end to violations. One concrete action would be for States to refrain from exporting or transferring arms to a party to an armed conflict, where there is a real risk that they would be used in breach of international humanitarian law. In this vein, Human rights work is crucial to peace; preventing conflict in the first place; providing early warning signals when conflict is likely to erupt; and establishing objective, reliable facts of what has happened in the fog of war, to achieve truth and justice for every victim; and to ensuring peace negotiations are inclusive and acceptable to all parties, and therefore truly sustainable. **Guatemala, Colombia, Cambodia, Nepal, and Liberia** were the peace agreements and accords mentioned.

International cooperation, grounded in human rights, is the channel to effect change and address the massive challenges of this time. Multilateral institutions, including the international human rights system, are at the disposal of the international community to enable dialogue, address the roots of mistrust, facilitate progress, and importantly, be the voice of reason, based on evidence and facts, in turbulent times, developing much-needed longer-term thinking and providing concrete solutions to concrete problems.