



GENEVA CENTRE FOR HUMAN RIGHTS
ADVANCEMENT AND GLOBAL DIALOGUE

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Global Update by the High Commissioner

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PRESENTATION

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Our world is going through turbulence and unpredictability reflected in growing conflict and divided societies. The international community has come through many setbacks and periods of geopolitical turmoil since the founding of the United Nations. But what we are experiencing goes to the very core of the international border, an order that has brought us an unprecedented level of global stability.

The immense plight caused by armed conflicts raging all across the world

We cannot allow the fundamental global consensus around international norms and institutions built painstakingly over decades to crumble before our eyes. I am here to sound the alarm. According to the International Committee of the Red Cross, 120 conflicts rage around the world.

War is the ultimate violation of human rights. It is outrageous that across these conflicts, the legal frameworks designed to safeguard civilians, limit damage, and ensure justice are dismissed and discarded blatantly and repeatedly. Civilians are deliberately attacked. Sexual violence and



famine are used as weapons of war. Humanitarian access is denied while weapons flow across borders and circumvent international sanctions, and humanitarian workers are targeted. In 2024, a record **356 humanitarian workers were killed** while providing aid to people in some of the world's most appalling crises. Conflict is a chaos machine.

Armed conflicts wreaking havoc worldwide

As I briefed last week, the conflict in **Sudan** threatens to explode across the region. Parties to the conflict and their allies continue to launch devastating attacks on densely populated areas and civilian infrastructure with total impunity as the world's worst humanitarian catastrophe deepens. Civilians are paying an unbearable price in a naked struggle for power and resources. All countries must use their influence to apply pressure on the parties and their allies to stop the war, embark on an inclusive dialogue, and transition to a civilian-led government.

In **Ukraine**, three years since the full-scaling Russian invasion, people continue to suffer appallingly. Civilian casualties rose by 30 percent between 2023 and 2024. Russia's armed forces have systematically targeted Ukraine's energy infrastructure with coordinated strikes, severely reducing the electricity capacity and causing widespread disruption to essential services. Relentless attacks with aerial glide bombs, long-range missiles, and drones have placed civilians in a state of constant insecurity and fear. In occupied territory, the Russian Federation continues to restrict Ukrainians' fundamental rights and freedoms severely. I am dismayed by continued reports of summary executions and the widespread and systematic torture of Ukrainian prisoners of war by Russian forces. This situation is dire. Any discussions about ending the war must include Ukrainians and fully respect their human rights. Sustainable peace must be based on the United Nations Charter and international law.

In **Gaza**, Israel's means and methods of warfare in response to the horrific attacks by Hamas and other Palestinian armed groups on 7 October 2023 have razed the territory and shredded the social and physical fabric. We must above all make sure the fragile ceasefire in Gaza holds and becomes the basis for peace. Any solution to the cycles of violence must be rooted in human rights, including the right to self-determination, the rule of law and accountability. All hostages must be freed, all those detained arbitrarily must be released, and humanitarian aid into Gaza must resume immediately. In the **West Bank**, I am alarmed by the use of military weapons and tactics, including tanks and airstrikes against Palestinians, the destruction and emptying of refugee camps, the expansion of illegal settlements, the severe restrictions on movement and the displacements of tens of thousands of people. Israel's unilateral actions and threats of annexation in the West Bank in violation of international law must stop.

The recent escalation in the **Eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo** (DRC) is now drawing in regional players and devastating entire communities in North and South Kivu. In the past five weeks, thousands of people have reportedly been killed during attacks by the M23 armed group backed by the Rwandan armed forces in intense fighting against the armed forces of the DRC and their allies. There are horrifying reports of rape, sexual slavery and summary executions. More than half a million people have been forced to flee this year, adding to almost 7.8 million people already displaced in the country. The violence must stop, violations by all parties must be investigated and dialogue must resume.



In **Myanmar**, 2024 was the deadliest year for civilians since the military coup four years ago. The military ramped up brutal attacks on civilians as their grip on power eroded with retaliatory airstrikes and artillery shelling of villages and urban areas, arbitrary arrests and prosecutions and the forcible conscription of thousands of young people. I've urged the international community to cut decisively the supply of arms and finance that enabled the military's vicious repression.

In **Haiti**, gang violence spiralled out of control last year. More than 5,600 people were killed and thousands more were injured or kidnapped. Deep economic and social inequalities have been exacerbated by violence, including sexual violence and violence against children. Over one million people are internally displaced, half of them children. Full implementation of the Security Council's arms embargo and support to the multinational security support mission are crucial to resolving this crisis.

Hostilities in and around **Yemen** continue with an alarming impact on the human rights and humanitarian situation. Almost 20 million Yemenis need humanitarian support. I am outraged by the **death of a World Food Programme colleague in detention** earlier this month. All 23 UN staff, including eight colleagues from my own office, who are arbitrarily detained by the Houthis, must be released immediately.

Conflict bleeding into all our lives

Conflict causes chaos, but it arises from its own twisted logic. Some people, autocrats, demagogues, profiteers, benefit from that chaos, whether through divide-and-rule tactics, predatory business practises or simple sex. Conflict bleeds into all our lives, from the products we buy to the news feeds we scroll, from minerals mined in war zones to the so-called bot farms and scam centres that flourish in the most lawless corners of the world. We are all somewhat implicated and we all have a responsibility to act through our consumption habits, our social media use and our political and social engagement.

2023, the deadliest year for health workers

Accountability is key, making sure perpetrators of abuses and violations are held to account for their crimes. We can trace a clear line between the lack of accountability for airstrikes on hospitals in Syria in the 2010s, attacks on healthcare facilities in Yemen and the destruction of health systems in Gaza and Sudan. According to one study, 2023 was the deadliest year for healthcare workers in a decade. Some **480 were killed during armed conflict**, nearly double the previous year.

Accountability remedies the past and protects the future

Last month, for example, a **Swedish court** convicted an ISIS-affiliated woman of genocide, crimes against humanity and war crimes against the Yazidis in 2015. A **court in Mexico** recently upheld the conviction of five military officers for the extrajudicial executions of university students in 2010. Ongoing investigations by the **International Criminal Court** into various situations create hope of justice for victims everywhere. Around the world, civil society, lawyers and victims are calling on warring parties to respect international law and pursue avenues of accountability.



Corporate accountability and climate justice

States need to be put on notice that the world is watching, including on arms transfers to conflict zones. Beyond states, corporations must also be held to account, including for damage to our climate and our environment. In December, for example, the Supreme Court of Kenya reaffirmed a landmark decision awarding compensation for death caused by lead poisoning. I am also encouraged by a growing wave of litigation that seeks to hold fossil fuel companies to account for climate-related damage. But these cases are the exception rather than the rule. In this connection, I urge the European Union to maintain robust human rights and environmental due diligence at the heart of their corporate sustainability laws as they consider reforms.

An absence of accountability leads directly to an absence of peace

Yet, a tireless search for peace is what the world needs most. Pre-emptive strikes cannot replace preventive diplomacy. Today, **Wars are lasting longer** and peace negotiations are less successful. According to one study, the number of conflicts that ended through peace agreements fell from 23 percent in the 1970s to 4 percent in the 2010s. For millions of people around the world, war has become a simple devastating fact of life. This should shake us all. We need to build peace from the ground up, to grasp it, nurture it, protect it, and promote it at every opportunity. Bring warring parties to the table. Ensure that women are involved from beginning to end. Build peace around human rights. **Transitional justice** seeks to do exactly that. It helps fractured societies to heal, reconcile, and rebuild. We see its impact all over the world.

In **Liberia**, my Office's support has played an important part in advancing transitional justice and promoting accountability. Establishing the Office of the War and Economic Crimes Court last year, last May, was a significant step towards justice for victims of the civil wars between 1989 and 2003. In **Colombia**, we are reminded of the importance of the participation of civil society in peace-building efforts, notably women, Afro-descendants, and Indigenous peoples. Peace requires constant vigilance as part of a sustained, victim-centred transitional justice process.

The design and implementation of **Ethiopia's** transitional justice process will be key to demonstrating its ability to address past violations. This is a fragile moment. The human rights situation continued to be dire in 2024, notably in the Amhara and Oromia regions. The situation in Tigray has improved since the cessation of hostilities agreements, but tensions remain high. Worryingly, civic space has become more restricted throughout the country. Proposed amendments to the media law put the rights to freedom of expression, association, and peaceful assembly at risk. None of these steps are conducive to sustainable peace.

The **Western Balkans** are an example of transitional justice delayed. Over 30 years after the end of the conflict in Bosnia and Herzegovina, more progress on peace-building, economic and social reforms, and the protection of human rights are needed. Across the whole region, leaders must abandon ethno-nationalist agendas and revisionist narratives that justify or deny atrocity crimes and glorify convicted war criminals. My Office is working to get transitional justice back on track.

I am following closely the peace negotiations between **Armenia and Azerbaijan** in the hope that they will lead to a process of truth-telling, healing, and reconciliation. We stand ready to support.

All those arbitrarily detained in Azerbaijan, including ethnic Armenians, must be released immediately, and fair trial rights must be respected fully.

Bangladesh last year experienced a paroxysm of violence as the government of the time brutally suppressed a student movement that carried human rights at its torch. The country is now charting a new future. Our recent independent fact-finding report on the grave human rights violations that took place is an important contribution to this journey. I hope it will support truth-telling, accountability, reparations, healing, and reform. It will be crucial to ensure a due process in criminal cases and investigate revenge violence, including against minorities.

Syria is also at a critical turning point. My Office, together with local and international organisations, raised the alarms and documented appalling human rights violations and abuses for over 14 years before the regime was ousted. This record can now support justice and truth-telling. The interim authorities are facing difficult challenges, and we are ready to accompany them moving forward. I am concerned by reports of revenge violence and abuses. The authorities have an opportunity now to deliver on Syrians' expectations, guided by the human rights of all Syrians, regardless of their gender, ethnicity, religion, and race. Women must play a role in all transitional institutions and decisions.

When I visited **Lebanon** earlier this year, I was encouraged by the commitment of the new leadership to human rights. The country now has a unique opportunity to embark on legal reforms and address deep inequalities and other social and economic issues. This will be crucial to restore social cohesion, build public confidence in state institutions, and deliver on the aspirations of the Lebanese people.

Polarization and division as anathema to human rights

Even in societies that are nominally at peace, people are feeling insecure and unmoored. Communities and societies struggle with polarisation and division, which are anathema to human rights. I have followed recent election campaigns in Europe, North America, and beyond with increasing trepidation. Single-issue soundbites, devoid of substance, oversimplify complex issues and are often based on **scapegoating, disinformation, and dehumanisation**. Migration, for example, is an age-old phenomenon that can be addressed to everyone's benefit. Refugees fleeing persecution are entitled to live in safety free from harassment. And yet, migrants and refugees are widely labelled as illegals, criminals, vermin, or worse. We have heard these terms before.

Excessive use of force and deaths of **people of African descent** at the hands of law enforcement officials persist, often rooted in systemic racism. Other communities face deep-seated, caste-based discrimination related to work and descent. **LGBTIQ+** people, particularly transgender people, continue to face high levels of violence, harassment, and discrimination in all regions of the world. **Persons with disabilities** face discrimination, bias, and stigma every day. Dehumanisation is a well-worn step towards treating an entire group as outsiders, unworthy of the basic rights we all enjoy. It is a dangerous precursor to hate and violence and must be called out whenever it occurs.



Women's and girls' rights at considerable risk of regression

From autocracies to democracies, **women and girls** are denied their rights in myriad ways. In **Afghanistan**, women and girls are subject to state-sponsored **gender apartheid** that is unparalleled in today's world. Virtual prisoners within their homes are denied the most basic and fundamental freedoms essential to normal life, including movement, education, and work. I am deeply concerned for the long-term future of a country that is self-harming on a national scale. In **Iran**, the hijab law has been temporarily suspended and I call again on the authorities to repeal the law fully and permanently, along with all other laws and practises that discriminate against women and girls. I also urge them to **release all human rights defenders** from detention and to end arbitrary arrests and imprisonment. I am deeply troubled by the marked increase in executions last year, with over 900 reported cases. I have urged the Iranian authorities to place an immediate moratorium on the use of the death penalty.

More broadly, I am concerned about the resurgence in some quarters of toxic ideas about masculinity and efforts to glorify gender stereotypes, especially among young men. It is shocking to me that **misogynistic influencers** have millions of followers on social media and are hailed as heroes in some quarters. Online and offline these ideas are translating into a wider pushback against gender equality, as well as violence and hateful rhetoric against women, women human rights defenders, and women politicians. We see these trends across all regions, from Latin America and Africa to East Asia, Europe, North America, and beyond.

In some cases, they are making their way into reforms to laws and policies and risk reversing hard-won gains on gender equality. While more than 60 countries and territories have liberalised their abortion laws over the past 30 years, we are now seeing **attempted rollbacks** in many countries. 40 percent of women globally live under restrictive abortion laws. As always, it is the most marginalised women who suffer most.

Worrying human rights rollbacks in the United States of America

We have enjoyed bipartisan support from the United States of America on human rights over many decades, thanks to the generosity and compassion of the American people. I am now deeply worried by the fundamental shift in direction that is taking place domestically and internationally. In a paradoxical mirror image, policies intended to protect people from discrimination are now labelled as discriminatory. Progress is being rolled back on gender equality. Disinformation, intimidation, and threats, notably against journalists and public officials, risk undermining the work of independent media and the functioning of institutions. Divisive rhetoric is being used to distort, deceive, and polarise. This is generating fear and anxiety among many.

A troubling world's outlook

On these issues and more, my Office will continue building on our long history of constructive engagement. Societies need certain ingredients to thrive. A free public square with space for open debate, free and independent media, an independent judiciary, and transparent and representative state institutions. But when I look around the world, I see a troubling picture.



In **Nicaragua**, the recent constitutional reform significantly increases the concentration of power in the presidency and dismantles checks and balances. Fundamental rights are at risk of being further curtailed, including the elimination of the prohibition of torture. I urge the Nicaraguan authorities to return to a democratic path and pursue a meaningful and constructive dialogue to this end.

In **Venezuela**, I noted the announcement that more than a thousand people were released after being detained following the presidential elections. All those arbitrarily detained must be released immediately. Political negotiations between the different stakeholders are urgently needed to agree to a viable pathway forward. I call for all electoral processes to be transparent, inclusive, peaceful, and fully in line with international rights standards.

In **Argentina**, I am troubled by recent executive actions that bypass established procedures for Supreme Court appointments, which risk undermining the independence of the judiciary and the rule of law. I also have serious concerns about the effect of austerity policies on the growing number of people living in poverty.

In **Mozambique**, I call for the impartial and independent investigation into human rights violations and abuses which took place in the post-election period. My Office is ready to work together with the new government and civil society to advance respect and protection of human rights in the country, including to strengthen human rights compliance of security forces.

We have received many reports about a continued crackdown in the **Russian Federation** on civil society and independent media under the guise of national security. Stringent laws have been adopted to stifle free expression, labelling critical voices as foreign agents or undesirable organisations. Many journalists and activists, including anti-war protesters, have faced harassment, arrest, or exile, resulting in the near elimination of any form of dissent within the country.

In **Belarus**, severe limitations on freedom of expression, association, and assembly persist, and human rights activism has all but disappeared. I note the recent series of releases from detention and call on the authorities to free all those who remain arbitrarily detained.

While **China** is engaging with the international human rights system, I refer back to my previous updates, raising serious concerns and hope to see meaningful progress on these issues. I continue to make representations on behalf of lawyers, human rights defenders, and citizen journalists who have been arbitrarily detained under vague criminal offences. In **Hong Kong Special Administrative Region**, the broad application of national security laws continues to stifle civic space. The recent report by the International Labour Organisation experts on counterterrorism measures and labour programmes in the Xinjiang region reinforces our own grave concerns and the urgency of addressing our long-standing recommendations. I am also concerned by the impact of education policies and continued restrictions on freedom of expression, religion, and belief in the **Tibet Autonomous Region**. I will take these issues forward in our ongoing engagement.

In **Thailand**, I remain troubled by the dissolution of the Move Forward Party last August and the legal cases being pursued against its leaders. This impacts the people's right to participate in



public affairs and political life. Given last week's deportation of ethnic Uyghurs, I also call on Thailand to respect the fundamental principle of non-refoulement.

India's democracy and institutions have been its greatest strength, underpinning its diversity and development. Democracy requires constant nurturing of participation and inclusion at all levels of society. I am concerned by the use of restrictive laws and harassment against human rights defenders and independent journalists, resulting in arbitrary detention and a diminished civic space, including in Kashmir. I also call for stepped-up efforts to address violence and displacement in Manipur based on dialogue, peace-building, and human rights.

Civic space is shrinking in **Egypt**, where the authorities are using anti-terrorism legislation against those expressing dissent, including human rights defenders, journalists, bloggers, and peaceful demonstrators. These practises are creating fear, silence in critical voices, and hindering participation of human rights defenders in international human rights processes. I reiterate my call for the release of all those detained for exercising their human rights. We are seeing similar trends in other countries, including **Algeria and Tunisia**.

Worrying global trends - Insidious targeting of journalists, dissidents and HRDs

On a more general note, I am particularly concerned by the growing phenomenon of targeting journalists, human rights defenders (HRDs), and political dissidents across borders, using technology to track them. This insidious practise is used to intimidate, threaten, silence, detain, forcibly disappear, and even kill opponents and critics. It sends a clear message that no place is safe, and leaves people living in a constant state of fear. Globally, the number of direct physical incidents of **transnational repression** has been rising since 2020, with egregious examples from around the world. We have observed in particular a pattern of abductions, disappearances, in some cases killings, in mainland Southeast Asia. I urge all states to adopt a zero-tolerance policy toward extra-legal transfers, renditions, and abductions, and to ensure full accountability for these violations, as well as respect for the principle of non-refoulement.

Today's massive shifts and profound transformations have left people in many countries around the world feeling alienated and abandoned. They believe their grievances and fears for the future are not taken seriously. As a result, they have lost trust in political leadership and institutions, which leads to more fragmentation. My response is, your concerns are our concerns, because they are about human rights, to education, to health, to housing, to free speech, and access to justice. Human rights are about people's daily concerns for their families and their future. They are also about equity, global solidarity, and sustainable development. Human rights can never be played off against each other. They reinforce each other and reveal how we are all connected. The solution to today's pervasive unease lies in more respect for human rights, not less. It lies in uniting around more effective and efficient multilateral institutions and frameworks that protect us all.

Voicing criticism against attempts to undermine the vital work of the ICC

I am deeply troubled by efforts from a number of countries to undermine and inhibit the functioning of international legal frameworks and institutions, including the International Criminal Court, which is a fundamental pillar of international criminal justice. I am stunned by



the ease with which various international institutions are cast aside with measures that hinder the vital work they and their staff carry out.

Mutually reinforcing investments in sustainable development, environment and health

Economic systems must deliver on economic, social, cultural, civil, and political rights, the right to development, and the right to a clean, healthy, and sustainable environment. The Paris Agreement is an essential tool. We need a laser focus on stopping the climate crisis in its tracks and protecting those already feeling the heat. The World Health Organisation plays an essential role in preventing pandemics and safeguarding people's well-being, sweeping cuts to domestic social safety nets, climate finance, and foreign aid signal a massive setback for human rights protection, for conflict prevention, and for global stability. Social security, humanitarian and development aid, climate finance, and national security are not in opposition. They are mutually reinforcing.

Today power dynamics are changing. Individuals and corporations have never had so much control and influence over our lives. A handful of unelected tech oligarchs have our data. They know where we live, what we do, our genes, and our health conditions, our thoughts, our habits, our desires, and our fears. They know us better than we know ourselves, and they know how to manipulate us. Any form of unregulated power can lead to oppression, subjugation, and even tyranny, the playbook of the autocrat. We must adapt fast. States must fulfil their duty to protect people from unchecked power and work together to achieve this.

Cherishing the values of respect, solidarity and compassion

In response to all the challenges I have outlined, we need to bring back the value of science, knowledge, and facts. And we need a clear, unequivocal commitment to the rule of law, to transparency, to independent institutions all anchored in human rights. We also need a global coalition pushing for an alternative vision based on wisdom, justice, and compassion.

Last week I was struck how many leaders from all regions of the world are united around the cause of human rights. We must inspire with our values and demonstrate that human rights are a winning proposition for humanity. We must cherish the values of respect, unity, and solidarity, and work together for a safer, more just, more sustainable world.

We can and will persevere.