



GENEVA CENTRE FOR HUMAN RIGHTS  
ADVANCEMENT AND GLOBAL DIALOGUE

## UNITED NATIONS HUMAN RIGHTS COUNCIL

Oral Update by High Commissioner Volker Türk

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### ORAL PRESENTATION

**H.E. Mr. Volker TÜRK, United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights**

Human rights - all human rights - are the solid foundations of flourishing societies. They are the bonds of trust between people and their governments. They are a beacon of hope in the search for a better world that rejects violent conflict, brutality, and injustice. They help overcome trauma and division, and are the **antidote to exceptionalism, supremacy, and contempt** for the other. Human rights provide a compass to steer us through the challenges of our time, from the climate crisis to technological developments.

#### **A troubling erosion of human rights across the world**

Yet, disturbing trends that undercut our rights are gaining ground across the world. Pro-war propaganda is everywhere, from military parades to ramped up rhetoric. Sadly, there are no Peace parades, or Ministries of Peace. The glorification of violence is coupled with a troubling erosion of international law. This law is the foundation of peace, our global order, and our daily lives, from trade rules to the global internet, to our fundamental rights.



But several Governments are disregarding, disrespecting, and disengaging from it. When States ignore violations of the law, they become normalized. When States apply the law inconsistently, they undermine the legal order everywhere. It is time for States to wake up, and to act. Around the world, the long-established rules of war are being shredded - with virtually no accountability.

### Century-old rules governing war torn apart

Russia's war in **Ukraine** has turned even more deadly. In July, more civilians were killed and injured than in any month since May 2022, as the Russian Federation intensified attacks along the frontline and on cities across the country. Recent weeks have witnessed some of the most massive air strikes since the war began, with countrywide drone and missile saturation attacks resuming and intensifying. Deliberate attacks on civilian energy systems and other infrastructure that is essential to civilian life are grave violations of international law. Ukrainian prisoners of war and civilians who are arbitrarily detained are subjected to widespread and systematic torture and ill-treatment.

In **areas under Russian occupation**, the Russian Federation is imposing its own legal and governance systems, preventing Ukrainians from freely expressing their opinions, and restricting their movement. OHCHR staff on the ground are working to document these violations, together with those committed by Ukraine. Negotiations to stop the fighting need to focus on immediate steps to protect civilians and safeguard the rights of people in occupied territory, as well as end torture and ill-treatment. Lasting peace can only come with full respect for international law.

In **Sudan**, both the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) and the Sudanese Armed Forces continue to show an utter disregard for international humanitarian and human rights law. Thousands of civilians have been killed this year, and hostilities are intensifying in Darfur and Kordofan. Both sides target health facilities, markets, and water plants. The scale of the suffering of the Sudanese people across this vast country is unfathomable, demanding the full attention of the world.

After more than a year under RSF siege, the situation in El Fasher is catastrophic. People are struggling to find food, water and medical supplies under constant bombardment. Sexual violence is widespread, predominantly against displaced women and girls. There are no safe routes out of the city, and the High Commissioner has repeatedly raised the **risk of further atrocities and ethnically motivated violence**. Decisive action is urgently needed to prevent further atrocity crimes. All countries need to respect the UN Security Council's arms embargo; pressure the parties to protect civilians; ensure full humanitarian access; and urgently resume dialogue on a ceasefire, an end to the conflict and a return to civilian rule.

The people of **Myanmar** are caught up in a harrowing human rights calamity, four years since the coup. The military targets civilians in their homes, villages, schools and camps with aerial attacks and bombardment, arbitrary arrests, torture, sexual violence, and forced recruitment. In Rakhine state, the Arakan Army is subjecting people to many of the same crimes.

In the **Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC)**, there is damning evidence of continued grave violations and abuses by all parties to the conflict. The High Commissioner will provide the UN Human Rights Council with extensive updates on Myanmar and the DRC in the forthcoming interactive dialogues.



### Need for urgent action to end the carnage in Gaza

**Israel's** mass killing of Palestinian civilians in Gaza; its infliction of indescribable suffering and wholesale destruction; its hindering of sufficient lifesaving aid and the ensuing starvation of civilians; its killing of journalists; and its commission of war crime upon war crime, are shocking the conscience of the world. The High Commissioner is horrified by the **open use of genocidal rhetoric**, and the disgraceful dehumanization of Palestinians by senior Israeli officials.

The region is crying out for peace. **Gaza is a graveyard**. Israel remains in deep trauma after the horrific attacks by Hamas and other armed groups on 7 October and the continued holding of hostages. Further militarization, occupation, annexation and oppression will only feed more violence, retribution, and terror. Israel has a legal obligation to take the steps ordered by the International Court of Justice, to prevent acts of genocide, punish incitement to genocide, and ensure enough aid reaches Palestinians in Gaza. OHCHR monitoring and reporting are an important contribution to future accountability. Israel has a case to answer before the ICJ, and the evidence continues to mount.

The **international community is failing** in its duty. We are failing the people of Gaza. Where are the decisive steps to prevent genocide? Why are countries not doing more to avert atrocity crimes? They must stop the flow to Israel of arms that risk violating the laws of war. They must apply maximum pressure for a ceasefire, the release of hostages and those arbitrarily detained, and the entry of sufficient humanitarian aid into Gaza - through all the means at their disposal. They must take decisive action to oppose Israel's planned military takeover of Gaza and its accelerating annexation of the occupied West Bank. The High Commissioner further urges their backing for the right to self-determination of the Palestinian people.

### Multilateralism under unprecedented attack

The retreat by some States from multilateral frameworks, institutions and international agreements is another troubling trend. The High Commissioner is profoundly disturbed by arrest warrants issued by the Russian Federation and sanctions imposed by the United States on **judges and prosecutors of the International Criminal Court**. The US sanctions against Special Rapporteur Francesca Albanese appointed by this Council need to be reversed. The **illegal detention** of OHCHR staff in Yemen is a direct attack on the UN system. They must be released immediately and unconditionally.

The decisions by Estonia, Finland, Latvia, Lithuania and Poland to leave the **Anti-Personnel Mine Ban Convention** (Ottawa Treaty) weakens its protection for everyone. The **United States' withdrawal** from the Paris Agreement and from global bodies, including the Human Rights Council and the Universal Periodic Review process, is deeply regrettable. The High Commissioner is further concerned by the new trend of **disparaging the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development**, agreed by all countries ten years ago.

Some States are also **reducing their regional engagement**. Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger have left the Economic Community of West African States. Venezuela has declared its intention to withdraw from the jurisdiction of the Inter-American Court of Human Rights. The Russian Federation has left the European Convention on Human Rights.



## Countries turning their backs on human rights

Gradually, the web of global and regional cooperation carefully crafted over decades for the common good is being weakened. Some States are becoming an **extension of their ruler's personal power**. Global and regional frameworks are far from perfect. But States need to reform and strengthen them - not unravel them. We shall not return to the outdated thinking and approaches that led to two World Wars and the Holocaust. As crises grind on and international law is eroding, global progress on human rights stalls or even goes into reverse.

**Syria's** transition remains fragile. The High Commissioner is deeply concerned by the recent surge in violence in Suwayda, reports of grave human rights abuses, and persistent sectarian divisions. The High Commissioner urges the government to prioritize the protection of all communities, and to continue its efforts to seek accountability for past and current human rights violations and abuses. OHCHR staff in Damascus stands ready to provide support.

**Haiti** is entrenched in chaos, is plunging deeper into lawlessness amid endemic gang violence. In **Nigeria**, violence has sharply escalated. Intercommunal clashes are compounded by mass killings and large-scale displacement caused by Boko Haram and other armed groups. The High Commissioner is concerned by persistent allegations of serious violations by security forces in the context of counterterrorism operations, despite the Government's pledges to ensure accountability.

## An alarming surge in executions

The global trend towards abolition of the death penalty continues, but there is an alarming surge in executions in some States. In **Iran**, more than 840 people have reportedly been executed so far this year - more than double the number during the same period last year. **Saudi Arabia** executed at least 260 people this year. There are no verifiable figures for executions in **China**. The High Commissioner continues to call for transparency and reform, including a moratorium and abolition.

## Human rights as a pick-and-choose menu

Meanwhile, some States are ignoring human rights law completely, or picking and choosing, as though our rights are an *à la carte menu*. OHCHR latest report on the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) makes clear that the entire population is suffering brutal repression and fear. Across the Sahel, in Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger, military authorities are **cracking down on civic space**; conducting arbitrary arrests, detentions and forced conscriptions; and silencing dissenting voices, as part of their highly militarized response to armed extremism. NGOs have been suspended, political parties banned, and draconian new laws have been introduced to curtail media freedom. In Mali, the indefinite renewal of presidential terms and suspension of elections violate the right of every citizen to participate in public affairs.

In Iran, the authorities have reportedly detained hundreds of people, including minorities, under vague charges of collaboration or espionage. Across the globe, from China to Türkiye and Venezuela, civic space is constrained, **dissent is silenced**, and peaceful protests are suppressed. One significant case is Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, where the





sweeping national security powers used against civil society and human rights defenders have sharply curtailed the vitality of an open and free public square.

Authorities have used **excessive force against protestors** in Indonesia, Kenya, Togo and beyond. Media freedom is declining, and human rights defenders are being criminalized from Egypt to the Russian Federation. The European Commission's 2025 Rule of Law report observes that civic space is shrinking in several EU Member States. Some are **curtailing peaceful protests**, while others are imposing restrictions that hinder the work of NGOs. Recent laws in Ecuador could reduce the accountability of law enforcement, expand the powers of the intelligence services and reduce civic space. Attacks on the Constitutional Court are unacceptable. The amnesty law adopted last month in Peru is a step backwards for justice and truth.

### **Regression in the human rights of minorities and the most vulnerable**

Heavy-handed responses only lead to more alienation, unrest and violence. International human rights law protects all, including the most vulnerable. Yet attacks on minorities of all kinds are growing, as States roll back commitments to tackle and prevent discrimination.

Excessive use of force and deaths of **people of African descent** at the hands of law enforcement persist in many States, often rooted in systemic racism. **Indigenous Peoples** continue to be denied their rights to land and to free, prior, and informed consent in mining and other commercial projects. Violations against **Roma** are widespread in several European countries and beyond, including police violence, hate speech, and systemic exclusion in health, education and housing. Representation of Roma in the European parliament has shrunk to zero.

In China, the progress we have sought for the protection of the rights of **Uyghurs and other Muslim minorities** in Xinjiang, as well as Tibetans in their regions, have yet to materialize. This is a priority for OHCHR engagement. Restrictions on the rights of **LGBTQ+ people** are growing in West Africa where some countries have adopted or are considering laws that criminalize consensual same-sex relations.

In the United Kingdom, **persons with disabilities** will be disproportionately affected by planned cuts to health benefits. In Argentina, austerity measures are having the greatest impact on persons with disabilities and older people.

Several countries around the world are cutting crucial programmes that protect **women's rights**, including support for survivors of violence and access to sexual and reproductive healthcare. Maternal mortality is a leading killer of the most marginalized women and girls. This is a tragedy because it is largely preventable. Afghanistan, where women's access to healthcare – among many other human rights – is severely restricted, has one of the highest maternal mortality rates in the world. Four years after the return of the Taliban, the erasure of women and girls from public life is almost complete.

### **Rights of migrants, refugees and stateless persons in peril**

Policies and practices that violate the rights of migrants and refugees are becoming normalized in some countries. Pakistan and Iran have forcibly returned millions of Afghans to their country, and India has also deported groups of Rohingya Muslims by land and sea. The High



Commissioner further expresses concern over recent measures taken by Germany, Greece, Hungary, and other European countries to limit the right to seek asylum. The United States has reportedly reached agreement with several governments, including El Salvador, South Sudan, Eswatini and Rwanda, on deporting third country nationals to places other than their homeland, raising concerns about compliance with international law.

Kuwait has revoked the citizenship of thousands of people in recent years, leaving many stateless. In Cambodia, changes to the constitution and nationality law allow the authorities to remove citizenship in cases of treason, creating further ways for them to target their critics. In a positive development, North Macedonia has resolved all known cases of statelessness since the dissolution of the former Yugoslavia - the first country in the region to do so.

### **Hate speech and disinformation fragmenting societies**

Human rights mechanisms, including the Human Rights Council, are a forcefield that protects people against unrestrained power. They warn us of potential harm to come, and we need to heed those warnings. **Hate speech** is a sign of rising tensions that can lead to violence. Around the world, we witness growing antisemitism, Islamophobia, homophobia, racism and large-scale disinformation campaigns. In Chad, Nigeria, and other countries in the region, conflicts between herders and farmers are aggravated by hateful narratives, escalating to deadly clashes. From South Sudan to Syria, hate speech compounds tensions and widens divisions.

The **lies and nihilism that fragment societies online** translate into real attacks on real people. In Cambodia and Thailand, for example, social media vitriol has been a factor in today's tensions. In Spain, online media were weaponized to instigate physical violence against migrants. In Serbia, online hate speech often goes unpunished. Civic space is rapidly shrinking, with dissent stigmatized, protesters and independent journalists targeted, and the use of excessive force by the police. The High Commissioner reiterates his call for restraint, dialogue, and accountability. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, deliberately divisive narratives and historical revisionism continue to undermine peace and reconciliation.

In the context of decades of dehumanization of the other, the High Commissioner welcomes the recent initialling of a peace agreement between **Armenia and Azerbaijan**. This is an important step towards upholding and advancing human rights, reconciliation, healing, and lasting peace. OHCHR is ready to support both countries in this process.

### **National elections as a litmus test for freedom of expression**

Freedom of expression is fundamental - but it does not protect those who use speech to spur violence and hatred. A growing number of leaders are now instrumentalizing freedom of expression to cover their own speech while silencing those who disagree. This must be called out, each and every time. OHCHR engages with national authorities, leaders, and media to develop strategies to define and counter incitement to hatred. Elections are a litmus test for Governments' commitment to freedom of expression and assembly, and the rule of law. Particularly in this field, OHCHR human rights monitoring rings the alarm bell and **helps prevent violations**.



OHCHR has been following preparations for **upcoming elections** in Cameroon, Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea, Guinea Bissau, Malawi, Tanzania and Uganda. The High Commissioner is deeply troubled that in many of these countries, the authorities are resorting to harassment, exclusion or detention of opposition leaders; restrictions on media freedom; bans on peaceful protest; and crackdowns on human rights defenders. Such actions, coupled with disinformation campaigns and hate speech, could feed tensions, polarization, and violence. The High Commissioner urges the authorities in these countries to **reverse course immediately**.

Ahead of next year's elections in Ethiopia, the High Commissioner is concerned about arbitrary detentions of journalists and recent laws that may restrict freedom of association and expression. Against a backdrop of conflict in several regions, the Ethiopian authorities need to ensure conditions for free, fair and inclusive elections. The High Commissioner welcomes the agreement allowing OHCHR to establish a new presence in Bangladesh to support the transition process in the country.

### **Sovereignty entails human rights responsibility**

Peace and security depend on full respect for human rights, everywhere. When the UN Security Council, the UN General Assembly, the UN Human Rights Council or other intergovernmental institutions discuss the human rights situation in a particular country, it is because this concerns us all, in every country. The United Nations Charter gave birth to a new geopolitical era by enshrining the **sovereign equality** of States.

National sovereignty is the foundation of multilateral institutions and international law. When States sign international agreements, they are exercising their national sovereignty - not limiting it. With sovereignty comes responsibility. Sovereignty does not mean ownership of people. All governments have a duty to treat all their people - including their political opponents - fairly; to protect them from harm; and to respect their fundamental human rights. When they abandon that responsibility, it affects us all.

### **Praising human rights advancements**

Multilateral conventions and agreements have won incredible support over the past eight decades, and continue to do so today. As sovereign States sign up to them, they guarantee greater freedom and protection for their people. Bhutan, Cameroon, Eritrea and Lebanon recently ratified the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD). Dominica ratified the United Nations Convention against Torture (UNCAT), and Bangladesh ratified its Optional Protocol (OPCAT). Malaysia and Vietnam have **abolished the use of the death penalty** for certain crimes.

The High Commissioner is also pleased to report that some member states are **increasing their engagement** with Special Rapporteurs and Human Rights Treaty Bodies. Cuba, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Dominica, Guatemala, Iceland, Rwanda, Saudi Arabia, Senegal, Singapore, Suriname and Zambia recently accepted visits by special procedures mandate holders after more than five years. Libya recently accepted the jurisdiction of the International Criminal Court for alleged crimes committed between 2011 and 2027.



### Giving a new life to universal jurisdiction

These are not empty gestures. They are tangible acts of leadership and responsibility. They confirm that the international system benefits States - and their people - in concrete and specific ways. When sovereign States fail to hold perpetrators of the gravest crimes to account, it is important that others are able to step in through the principle of universal jurisdiction, exercised in accordance with international law.

For example, in **Germany**, a Syrian colonel of the former regime was sentenced to life imprisonment for crimes against humanity that took place in Syria, and a court in the **Netherlands** convicted a corporate executive for complicity in war crimes in Guinea and Liberia. A federal court in the **United States** convicted a Gambian national on charges of torture.

### Key partners for stepping up human rights

Within sovereign States, stakeholders beyond the government can also step up for human rights. The High Commissioner is very encouraged by the growing number of **cities and regions** that are integrating human rights into urban governance. Cities have long been cradles of freedom and diversity - values that test authoritarian rule. OHCHR recent guidelines set out exactly what cities and regions can do to protect their people and their rights.

National Human Rights Institutions (NHRIs) are another important defence against discrimination, abuse, and the erosion of the rule of law. For example, the NHRI in South Africa is taking legal action to address hate speech. The NHRI in the Philippines has highlighted the impact of fossil fuels on the human rights of marginalized groups. Support for the independence and effectiveness of these national institutions is crucial.

Civil society and **social movements** often drive transformational change, from anti-racism and feminism to climate activism. They are natural partners of OHCHR, which intends to work much more closely together. Philanthropists are key partners to help achieve positive change on the ground.

The High Commissioner encourages them to collaborate and amplify their influence. The human rights and humanitarian communities find common ground in protecting civilians from the impact of conflict and crisis. More must be done to strengthen this essential partnership.

### Human rights education as the very best lifelong investment

Human rights education is one of the most important tools and investments we have to promote freedom, defend people from discrimination, and foster cohesion. The High Commissioner welcomes the commitment of and progress achieved by some member states. From the Arab region, to Guyana, Mongolia and South Africa, OHCHR is supporting efforts to develop human rights curricula, amplify young voices, and promote civic engagement.

But more must be done. Every child - whether a future farmer, digital worker, doctor or shopkeeper - should know that **human rights are our birthright** and concern us all. The High Commissioner calls on every member state to take action and share next year, at the 63rd session of the Council, their strategy to make sure their people learn about human rights throughout their lives.





### A truly global alliance for reversing the backlash on human rights

As this update shows, there are coordinated efforts to undermine human rights and the rule of law around the world. When States cut ties with the system or try to weaken it - when they isolate themselves - everybody loses. In response, we need a cross-regional movement to defend the international system. That is the only viable path to reach collective solutions to the **existential threats we face today**. Therefore, the High Commissioner hope to work together on a new initiative, through an alliance of member states, philanthropies, civil society and others, to strengthen the human rights ecosystem and join the dots between abuses and violations, and crisis prevention. This will contribute to achieving the goal of the Secretary-General's **UN80 Initiative**, with a view to improving coordination and delivering better for the people the UN was created to serve.

OHCHR is working to **convene this alliance on several fronts**. First, OHCHR will enhance its engagement with all governments, even in the face of fierce disagreement, encouraging frank exchanges and keeping dialogue open. What gives hope is that the vast majority of people around the world are crying out for human rights and freedoms. Second, OHCHR will reinforce the value of human rights to every citizen, and every government, through positive narratives and creative outreach. Third, OHCHR will **harness innovation for human rights**, including AI, by strengthening its partnerships with tech companies, academics, civil society and more. Fourth, OHCHR will develop and grow support for the human rights economy, together with partners. Fifth, OHCHR will bolster sustainable funding for human rights work by identifying new avenues and models.

### Safeguarding 80 years of freedom, equality and justice

History has shown time and again that no one is safe when human rights are under attack. Abuses committed against one group are always part of a broader pattern of oppression and lead to the wider erosion of fundamental freedoms. Human rights are meant to challenge our assumptions, identify the blind spots, and encourage self-critical reflection, because no one is perfect. UN human rights mechanisms are one of the only parts of the multilateral system that has teeth.

The High Commissioner strongly encourages to make use of them. Engaging with OHCHR and the human rights system as a whole is valuable, not for engagement's sake, but to achieve tangible progress for people everywhere. Together, we must refuse to back down in the face of discrimination, distortion, and lies. Together, we need to safeguard eighty years of progress on freedom, equality and justice.