

37th session of the Human Rights Council

Opening statement by UN High Commissioner for Human Rights

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Distinguished President of the General Assembly,
Distinguished Secretary General,
Excellencies,
Friends,

May I begin by welcoming the Security Council's unanimous decision in relation to a 30-day ceasefire in Syria, which came after intense lobbying by our Secretary-General and others, and we applaud Sweden and Kuwait for their leadership in the Security Council on this. We insist on its full implementation without delay. However, we have every reason to remain cautious, as airstrikes on eastern Ghouta continue this morning. Resolution 2401 (2018) must be viewed against a backdrop of seven years of failure to stop the violence: seven years of unremitting and frightful mass killing.

Eastern Ghouta, the other besieged areas in Syria; Ituri and the Kasais in the DRC; Taiz in Yemen; Burundi; Northern Rakhine in Myanmar have become some of the most prolific slaughterhouses of humans in recent times, because not enough was done, early and collectively, to prevent the rising horrors. Time and again, my office and I have brought to the attention of the international community violations of human rights which should have served as a trigger for preventive action. Time and again, there has been minimal action. And given this is my last address as High Commissioner at the opening of a March session, I wish to be blunt.

Second to those who are criminally responsible – those who kill and those who maim – the responsibility for the continuation of so much pain lies with the five permanent members of the UN Security Council. So long as the veto is used by them to block any unity of action, when it is needed the most, when it could reduce the extreme

suffering of innocent people, then it is they – the permanent members – who must answer before the victims.

France has shown commendable leadership among the P5 in championing a code of conduct on the use of veto; the United Kingdom has also joined the initiative, now backed by over 115 countries. It is time, for the love of mercy, that China, Russia and the United States, join them and end the pernicious use of the veto.

Mr. President,

A few miles away, at CERN, physicists try to understand what our planet, and the universe or universes, are made of. What matter is, at the most basic level, and how it all fits together. To understand the physical world, we humans have long realised we must tunnel deeply, beyond molecular biology and geology; and go to those sub-atomic spaces for answers.

Why do we not do the same when it comes to understanding the human world? Why, when examining the political and economic forces at work today, do we not zoom in more deeply? How can it be so hard to grasp that to understand states and societies – their health and ills; why they survive; why they collapse – we must scrutinize at the level of the individual: individual human beings and their rights. After all, the first tear in the fabric of peace often begins with a separation of the first few fibres, the serious violations of the rights of individuals – the denial of economic and social rights, civil and political rights, and most of all, in a persistent denial of freedom.

There is another parallel with physics. Gravity is a weak force, easily defied by a small child raising a finger, but there is also a strong force governing the orbits of planets and the like. So too with human rights. Some States view human rights as of secondary value – far less significant than focusing on GDP growth or geopolitics. While it is one of the three pillars of the UN, it is simply not treated as the equal of the other two. The size of the budget is telling enough, and the importance accorded to it often seems to be in the form of lip service only. Many in New York view it condescendingly as that weak, emotional, Geneva-centred, pillar -- not serious enough for some of the hardcore realists in the UN Security Council.

Yet like in physics, we also know human rights to be a strong force, perhaps the strongest force. For whenever someone in New York calls a topic “too sensitive,” there's a good chance human rights are involved. And why sensitive? Because a denial of rights hollows out a government's legitimacy. Every time the phrase “too sensitive” is used, it therefore confirms the supreme importance of human rights, and their effect as a strong force.

For no tradition, legal or religious, calls for or supports oppression – none. Discussions about rights are avoided by those who seek deflection because of guilt, those who shy away from difficult decisions and those who profit from a more superficial, simple, and ultimately useless, analysis. Better just leave it to Geneva, they say – and the crises continue to grow.

To understand the maladies of societies, grasp the risks of conflict, and prevent or resolve them we must -- like particle physicists – work ourselves into the smaller spaces of individuals and their rights, and ask the most basic questions there. The most devastating wars of the last 100 years did not come from countries needing more GDP growth. They stemmed from – and I quote from the Universal Declaration – a “disregard and contempt for human rights”. They stemmed from oppression.

Today oppression is fashionable again; the security state is back, and fundamental freedoms are in retreat in every region of the world. Shame is also in retreat. Xenophobes and racists in Europe are casting off any sense of embarrassment – like Hungary's Viktor Orban who earlier this month said "we do not want our colour... to be mixed in with others". Do they not know what happens to minorities in societies where leaders seek ethnic, national or racial purity? When an elected leader blames the Jews for having perpetrated the Holocaust, as was recently done in Poland, and we give this disgraceful calumny so little attention, the question must be asked: have we all gone completely mad?

Mr. President,

Perhaps we have gone mad, when families grieve in too many parts of the world for those lost to brutal terrorism, while others suffer because their loved ones are

arrested arbitrarily, tortured or killed at a black site, and were called terrorists for simply having criticized the government; and others await execution for crimes committed when they were children. While still more can be killed by police with impunity, because they are poor; or when young girls in El Salvador are sentenced to thirty years imprisonment for miscarriages; when transgender women in Aceh are punished and humiliated in public. When Nabeel Rajab is sentenced to five years for alleging torture; or when 17 year-old Ahed Tamimi is tried on 12 counts for slapping a soldier enforcing a foreign occupation. When journalists are jailed in huge numbers in Turkey, and the Rohingya are dehumanized, deprived and slaughtered in their homes – with all these examples bedeviling us, why are we doing so little to stop them, even though we should know how dangerous all of this is?

It is accumulating unresolved human rights violations such as these, and not a lack of GDP growth, which will spark the conflicts that can break the world. While our humanitarian colleagues tend to the victims – and we salute their heroism and their selflessness – their role is not to name or single out the offenders publicly. That task falls to the human rights community, that it is our task. For it is the worst offenders' disregard and contempt for human rights which will be the eventual undoing of all of us. This, we cannot allow to happen.

We will therefore celebrate, with passion, the 70 years of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which incarnates rights common to all the major legal and religious traditions. We will defend it, in this anniversary year, more vigorously than ever before and along with our moral leaders – the human rights defenders in every corner of the globe – we will call for everyone to stand up for the rights of others.

This is, in the end, a very human thing to do. Artificial intelligence will never fully replicate the moral courage, the self-sacrifice and, above all, the love for all human beings that sets human rights defenders apart from everyone else. As I close out my term as High Commissioner in the coming months, I wish to end this statement by saying it has been the honour of my life to have come to know many of these defenders; to have worked with them, and for them.

Thank you