

Media Update

26 February 2019

United Nations

PRESS BRIEFING BY THE SPOKESPERSON FOR GENERAL ASSEMBLY PRESIDENT ,
MARÍA FERNANDA ESPINOSA

President of the General Assembly gives key address at opening of the 40th session of the Human Rights Council in Geneva

United Nations Headquarters, New York, 25 February 2019: President of the General Assembly, María Fernanda Espinosa today joined H.E. Mr. Coly Seck, President of the Human Rights Council, H.E. Mr. Antonio Guterres, Secretary-General of the United Nations, Ms. Michelle Bachelet, United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights and H.E. Mr. Ignazio Cassis, Head of the Federal Department of Foreign Affairs of Switzerland, for the Opening of the 40th Session of the Human Rights Council in Geneva.

In her opening remarks, the PGA said that; ‘although many achievements have been made, challenges remain: women and girls continue to suffer from violence and discrimination; indigenous peoples and persons with disabilities are still excluded; and inequality within and among countries continues to deepen and this is perhaps one of the main challenges for human rights’. She made a call for a stronger Human Rights Council, for it to be more efficient and able to provide solutions and guarantee the promotion and protection of all human rights for all people. She also underscored the importance of a better coordination between General Assembly, in particular the Third Committee, and the Human Rights Council.

Later she met with Dr. Tedros Adhanom, Director-General of the World Health Organisation, H.E. Mr. Coly Seck, President of the Human Rights Council, H.E. Mr. Rodolfo Nin Novoa, Minister for Foreign Affairs of Uruguay, H.E. Ms. Epsy Campbell, First Vice-President of Costa Rica, as well as Ms. Catalina Devandas, Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Person with Disabilities. She also had an interview with *Le Temps* newspaper.



SPECIAL SPOTLIGHT ON MIGRATION, DEVELOPMENT AND YOUTH

From 26 to 28 February, three events at UN Headquarters in New York will put a special spotlight on migration, development and youth: [Expert Symposium on International Migration and Development](#) (26 February), [High-Level Debate on International Migration and Development](#) (27 February); and [International Dialogue on Migration: “Youth and migration: Engaging youth as key partners in migration governance”](#) (28 February). The events can be watched live via [UN Web TV](#).

Website: <https://www.un.org/pga/73/>

Twitter: https://twitter.com/UN_PGA

Instagram: <https://www.instagram.com/unpga>

YouTube: <https://bit.ly/2S7Wl3q>

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SECRETARY-GENERAL’S REMARKS TO THE HUMAN RIGHTS COUNCIL

Geneva, 25 February 2019:

Distinguished President of the Human Rights Council,

Madame High Commissioner, this is my first time before this Council in your new capacity. And I know your leadership will bring enormous added value to the advancement of human rights around the world.

Excellencies, Colleagues, Friends,

The Human Rights Council is the epicentre for international dialogue and cooperation on the protection of all human rights -- civil, political, economic, social and cultural.

Every door you open helps promote opportunity.
Every right you secure is another brick in the building of a better world.



Your efforts underscore how human rights are of value in themselves and should never be instrumentalized, and that they are also essential to advancing peace and human dignity. To empower women and girls. To deepen development. And to spark hope.

The rights enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights belong to everyone, everywhere.

They are independent of nationality, gender, sexual orientation, race, religion, belief or any other status.

In my inaugural speech as Secretary-General, I said that prevention must be a priority in everything we do.

Human rights are a template for this – building resilience and preventing crises.

Every measure to uphold human rights helps ease tensions, deliver sustainable development and sustain peace.

Our surge for diplomacy is also about promoting human rights.

If the ceasefire holds in Hudaydah, if the recent peace agreement takes root in the Central African Republic, if conflict ends in South Sudan – we will dramatically reduce human suffering and pave the way for a much needed justice for victims.

Of course, the primary responsibility to uphold and champion human rights rests with Member States – and I am encouraged by those who are leading the way, especially in these challenging times.

One of your key mechanisms is through the Universal Periodic Review, which brings to this Council the realities on the ground and collective commitments for progress.

Excellencies,
I speak from experience.

I lived under the Salazar dictatorship in Portugal which oppressed not only its own citizens, but also the peoples of the African colonies.

And it was the human rights struggles and successes of others around the world that moved us to believe in change and to make that change happen.

Human rights inspire and drive progress.

And that truth is the animating spirit of this Council.
It is the DNA of our Organization's founding Charter. And it is vital to addressing the ills of our world.

Excellencies, let us be clear. The human rights agenda is losing ground in many parts of the globe – but I am not losing hope.
Yes, we see troubling trends -- but we also see powerful movements for human rights and social justice.

Youth, indigenous people, migrants and refugees are demanding their rights and making their voices heard.
Journalists are fearlessly getting their stories out.
Women are bravely standing up and saying “me too”.

The largest number of countries in history have now abolished the death penalty or no longer practice it.
More people are speaking out about the indispensability of cultural rights for protecting the diversity of beliefs and practices on our planet – recognizing these rights as an essential tool for preserving diversity and our common heritage.

And we are seeing greater recognition of the imperative to ensure rights for persons with disabilities.

We have proven the case that it is only possible to fight terrorism successfully when human rights are upheld.

Our own Human Rights Up Front initiative is becoming more systematic in the capacity to spot early signs of crises and improving how we respond to them.
One billion people have been lifted out of extreme poverty in just a generation. More than two billion people have gained access to improved sanitation.

And more than 2.5 billion people have gained access to improved drinking water resources. The mortality rate for children under five has declined by almost 60 percent.

This year marks the 30th anniversary of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the most widely ratified international human rights instrument, and it is a rallying point for intensifying efforts to ensure we leave no child behind.

It is in this overall context of progress and concern that I want to focus on a few human rights challenges as I scan the global horizon.

The understanding that underpins these efforts reflect the indivisible and interdependent nature of civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights.

Excellencies,

Let's begin with those that hold up half the sky.

We can celebrate tremendous progress in the fight for women's rights and gender equality in recent decades.

In every continent, women have been elected to lead and occupy key positions in governments.

Gender gaps in education are closing around the world.

Maternal mortality has dropped by nearly half.

And I am proud that for the first time in UN history we have already achieved parity in the Senior Management Group and among Resident Coordinators around the world.

But much remains to be done at the UN and around the world.

Untold women and girls still face insecurity, violence and other violations of their rights every day.

Doors of economic opportunity remain closed. Glass ceilings abound.

And let's never forget gender equality is a question of power.

At present trends, it will take two centuries to close the gap in economic empowerment.

I do not accept a world that tells my granddaughters that economic equality can wait for their granddaughter's granddaughters.

I know you agree: Our world cannot wait. Excellencies,

I am also deeply alarmed by the shrinking civic space in every region of the globe – and every corner of the internet.

Activists and journalists are being targeted by surveillance, misinformation campaigns and threats of violence that too often result in actual violence.

The immediacy and reach of online threats pose serious challenges to those who wish to speak up.

Big data and facial-recognition technology are being misused for undue surveillance and interference with free speech, causing a chilling effect and a shrinking space for dialogue.

And meanwhile, harassment and attacks are on the rise. Over a thousand human rights defenders and journalists were killed in the last three years. In 2018, four environmental activists, mostly indigenous people, were killed every week.

We must do more to defend defenders and end reprisals against those who share their human rights stories.

And we must hold accountable those who commit such acts. And we must not tolerate the outrageous near impunity for crimes against journalists and other media workers.

Respect for human rights is just a game of words if there is no respect for people.

We must also work to close the gaps in discriminatory laws and practices that target people – in the workplace, in accessing public services or in the community – simply because of their sexual orientation, gender identity or sex characteristics.

Excellencies,
We are also seeing a groundswell of xenophobia, racism and intolerance – including rising anti-Semitism and anti-Muslim hatred. Hate speech is a menace to democratic values, social stability and peace. It spreads like wildfire through social media, the Internet, and conspiracy theories.

It is abetted by public discourse that stigmatizes women, minorities, migrants, refugees and any so-called “other”.

Indeed, hate is moving into the mainstream – in liberal democracies and authoritarian States alike.

Some major political parties and leaders are cutting and pasting ideas from the fringes into their own propaganda and electoral campaigns. And parties once rightly considered pariahs are gaining influence over governments.

And with each broken norm, the pillars of humanity are weakened. For our part, I have asked my Special Adviser for the Prevention of Genocide, Adama Dieng, to bring together a UN team to scale up our response to hate speech, define a system-wide strategy and present a global plan of action on a fast-track basis.

We have seen how the debate on human mobility, for example, has been poisoned with false narratives linking refugees and migrants to terrorism and scapegoating them for many of society's ills.

An insidious campaign sought to drown the Global Compact on Migration in a flood of lies about the nature and scope of the Agreement.

That campaign failed. And it was particularly fitting that the first day of the conference to adopt the Convention coincided with the 70th anniversary of the General Assembly adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

This action was soon followed with the adoption of a Global Compact on Refugees.

We must re-establish the integrity of the international refugee protection regime and continue to work for common values and international cooperation to reassert rights and help protect people from ruthless traffickers, smugglers and other predators.

And in this anniversary year of the Geneva Conventions, let us all recommit to upholding international humanitarian law.
