UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Zeid Ra’ad al Hussein Highlights Current Major Human Rights Issues in More than 40 Countries Around the World in an Address at the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva

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***(Issued as received)***Distinguished President of the Human Rights Council, Excellencies, Colleagues and Friends,  
   
"We the peoples, determined to reaffirm faith... in the equal rights of men and women" – taken from the Preamble of the UN Charter. Today we celebrate the courage and strength of women's movements, all over the world, in pursuit of equality. The rights to education, to work, to the vote – above all, to make their own decisions. Their achievements have been momentous, and the movement is an extraordinary one, as was demonstrated by the marches of the 21st of January. I salute their efforts, especially given the scale of challenges women still face around the world, which I have addressed in a statement I have issued for International Women's Day. I trust all delegations will give it close attention.   
  
Mr President,   
   
I would like to begin my statement by highlighting a number of countries where, despite very different human rights situations, I am happy to commend certain trends.  
  
In The Gambia, I applaud the principled actions of members of ECOWAS in supporting a peaceful conclusion to the Presidential election in December, at a time when so many other world leaders seem determined to remain in power at any cost. After years of repression of civil society, opposition parties and the media, incoming President Adama Barrow has publicly committed to upholding human rights in a broad range of reforms, including his decision for Gambia to remain a party to the International Criminal Court and his commitment to establish a Truth and Reconciliation Commission.  
  
In Uzbekistan, after years of pervasive human rights violations, and under incoming President Mirziyoyev, a series of laws have been drafted and approved in line with recommendations by UN human rights mechanisms. Most recently, in October, a decree on judicial and legal reform laid out conditions for fair trial, due process and judicial independence. Implementation of these laws will be the key to ensuring positive developments for all the people of the country. Among other prisoners who have been released, Muhammad Bekjanov, one of the world’s longest-jailed journalists, was freed two weeks ago after 18 years in prison, many spent in solitary confinement.   
  
I commend Tunisia’s continued efforts to place human rights at the centre of its transition and its exemplary cooperation with my Country Office. Particularly noteworthy is the government’s commitment to draft and push forward progressive laws on racial discrimination and on violence against women, which will mark an important improvement in access to justice for many victims. In a very challenging security situation, Tunisia’s willingness to integrate human rights into counter-terrorism operations demonstrates that the effective cooperation of member states with my Office – including when responding to security threats – is not only possible but beneficial to all.  
  
And in Greece two weeks ago, President Pavlopoulos visited a refugee centre and told children from Iraq, Syria and Afghanistan, "We welcome you. You are a part of us, and you will stay here as long as necessary, until the nightmare of war is over." In a continent of great wealth which appears determined to return large numbers of migrants, even to conditions which may be very dangerous, that statement – which expresses what should be universal, basic compassion – is all the more remarkable for coming from a country which is suffering economic hardship.   
  
Mr President,  
  
This past year has witnessed considerable bloodshed at the hands of extremist and terrorist groups, and I take this opportunity to once again strongly condemn all such violence, in every instance.   
  
My statement today will not detail the human rights situations in Afghanistan, Colombia, Cyprus, Guatemala, Guinea, Honduras, Libya, Sri Lanka, Syria, Ukraine or Yemen, since the Council will receive specific briefings from my Office during this session and in the High-Level Panel on Syria next week.   
  
As you are aware, my Office has faced difficulty obtaining access to a number of regions. In September, I raised this issue with the Council, highlighting among others Ethiopia, Syria, Turkey's south-east region, Venezuela, and both sides of the Line of Control, in India-Administered Jammu and Kashmir, and Pakistan-Administered Kashmir. In several areas where we have received indications of severe violations, and where access continues to be refused, my Office has begun remote monitoring, and fact-finding missions to neighbouring countries – reports which we intend to make public, and I will report on this further in June.   
  
Mr President,  
  
Last month I issued a very disturbing report on the alarming scale and severity of operations by the Myanmar security forces against Rohingya men, women and children in Rakhine State. These operations began in October, after a reported attack by armed assailants on three border guard facilities. Myanmar denied access to my Office, so our report stemmed from a mission by my Office to Bangladesh - where some 73,000 Rohingya refugees have fled. It found material evidence and corroborated eyewitness accounts of mass killings, including babies, children and elderly people unable to flee, and the burning of entire villages; shooting; massive detention; systematic rape and sexual violence; and deliberate destruction of food and sources of food. It appears that what has been termed by the security forces a "counter-insurgency operation" is in reality aimed at expelling the Rohingya population from Myanmar altogether,  as the Special Rapporteur has said.   
  
The severity of the reported violations, against a backdrop of severe and longstanding persecution, appears to me to amount to possible commission of crimes against humanity, which warrants the attention of the International Criminal Court. I therefore urge the Council, at minimum, to establish a Commission of Inquiry into the violence against the Rohingya, particularly during security operations since 9 October 2016. I reiterate our standing request to open an OHCHR office in the country.   
  
In the Philippines, over 7000 people have reportedly been killed since the anti-drug campaign was launched by the President last July. I am gravely concerned about this. Statements by the President have appeared to encourage the extrajudicial killings of people suspected of involvement in the drug trade – including his own admission that he personally engaged in killing suspected criminals while Mayor of Davao. This dangerous path may lead to deepening violence, and I call for a prompt, independent and credible investigation into all killings.  
  
The recent arrest of long-standing human rights defender Senator Leila de Lima, who has pursued investigations into extrajudicial killings, gives rise to concerns that people who seek justice will be prosecuted – perhaps even persecuted. Plans for a law to lower the minimum age of criminal responsibility to nine years old also demonstrate stark disregard for the State’s obligations under international law.   
  
In Cambodia, the pre-electoral period has featured a host of charges and threats against members of opposition parties and people exercising freedom of expression. Amendments to the Law on Political Parties, which were recently passed by Parliament without public consultation, permit indefinite de facto suspension of parties without due process, and fall far below human rights standards for freedom of association. The arbitrary pre-trial detention of human rights defenders from the Cambodia Human Rights and Development Association, ADHOC, has now surpassed 10 months, with no trial in sight. Recent crackdowns on drug users and traffickers, and continued roundups of people living or working on the streets, have meant thousands of people are now detained in inadequate conditions, many without benefit of due process. I stress that credible elections must be grounded in guarantees that courts will be independent and impartial, and that the freedoms of expression, peaceful assembly and association will be protected.   
  
The Government of China has stated its intention to play a leadership role in this Council. Thus far China has performed remarkably in lifting hundreds of millions of its people out of poverty in the past 30 years, and in investing in universal health care, quality education and protection of the elderly. China’s stated commitment to the rule of law is also welcome, especially when it is consistent with international human rights standards. This should include respect for the role of human rights defenders. I deplore the intimidation and detention of lawyers and activists who seek the good of their community and nation. I am also disturbed by cases of restrictions on cultural and religious rights, particularly in Xinjiang and Tibet, and I will continue to reach out to China for an effective dialogue on important human rights issues.  
  
I continue to be profoundly alarmed by incoming reports of extremely severe violations being suffered by the people of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea. This urgently needs to change. I look forward to studying the report of the Group of Independent Experts. I also welcome the DPRK's accession to the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, and hope it leads to deeper engagement with the mechanisms.   
  
Turning to Iran, I deplore the Government's restrictions on freedom of religion and belief, and the harmful practice of child marriage, which remains legal and pervasive throughout the country. I note, following engagement with the Government, the recent halt of imminent executions of two juveniles, but at least 80 remain on death row. The majority of death sentences are for drug-related offences, which do not meet the threshold of “most serious crimes”. In the past two months, 116 executions have reportedly taken place, and in 2016 over 530 people were reportedly put to death.   
  
Currently, over 80 percent of Member States have ceased putting people to death, either formally or with informal moratoria. Iran is among the four countries responsible for almost 90 percent of the executions carried out around the world; the others are China – where the number of executions is reportedly in the thousands every year; Saudi Arabia; and Pakistan – which in December 2014 stripped back the moratorium previously established, and resumed capital punishment. Bahrain, The Gambia, Indonesia, Jordan and Kuwait have also recently retreated from formal or informal commitments to moratoria on the death penalty. I deeply regret these retrograde trends, and also the stated intention of the Maldives, Papua New Guinea, Turkey and – as we saw yesterday – the Philippines to reinstate capital punishment. On the other hand, Togo, the Dominican Republic and São Tomé and Principe have all ratified and acceded to the Second Optional Protocol of the ICCPR.  
  
Mr President,   
  
In Turkey, bombs and other shocking terrorist attacks against civilians continue to claim lives, which I condemn, and I fully understand the authorities are operating in a challenging environment in many respects. However, I am concerned measures taken under the state of emergency appear to target criticism, not terrorism. The fact that tens of thousands of people have been dismissed, arrested, detained or prosecuted following the attempted coup – including numerous democratically elected representatives, judges and journalists – raises serious alarm about due process guarantees being met. It will be particularly crucial for the credibility of April's referendum on amending the Constitution that space for open debate, free of intimidation, be guaranteed.   
  
The human rights situation in south-east Turkey remains deeply troubling. Without access to the area, the remote monitoring procedure engaged by my Office has established credible indications of hundreds of deaths, suggesting disproportionate security measures in response to violent attacks. A report detailing this and other indications of serious violations will be released soon.  
  
While recognising the heroic efforts by many actors in the Mediterranean to save lives at sea, I am very concerned at increasing calls within the European Union to establish extraterritorial processing centres or camps in North Africa and elsewhere, and to engage external actors in migration issues, with little regard for human rights. For example, migrants apprehended at sea by the Libyan Coast Guard or similar agencies may be put at risk of further violence. I reiterate the importance of abiding by the principle that people must not be sent back to countries where they may face torture, persecution or threats to their life. Many ordinary people in Europe have welcomed and supported migrants, but political leaders increasingly demonstrate a chilling indifference to their fate. I am particularly disturbed by lurid public narratives which appear deliberately aimed at stirring up public fear and panic, by depicting these vulnerable people as criminal invading hordes.   
  
Last week Hungary's Prime Minister reportedly declared that "ethnic homogeneity" is key for economic success. No society is homogenous, least of all in Central Europe, and these toxic notions of so-called ethnic purity hark back to an era in which many people suffered atrociously, Hungarians included. Yesterday, the Hungarian Parliament passed a bill requiring all migrants to be transported to an area outside the country’s border fence. All asylum-seekers would be held in detention in this same area for the entire duration of the country's asylum procedure, which falls far short of international norms. As is also the case in Poland, the Hungarian Government has continued to undermine civil society and judges, and increase government influence over the media. In both countries, legislative changes have curbed the independence of Constitutional Courts.   
  
In other EU Member States, including the United Kingdom and France, judicial institutions traditionally accorded wide respect have been subjected to deep criticism, and in some cases abuse. I am concerned about a future trend in this direction which may compromise their independent functioning.   
  
Turning to the Russian Federation, I am concerned the Federal Law on Combatting Extremist Activity may have been arbitrarily used to curb freedom of expression, including political dissent, as well as freedom of religion, due to a vague and open-ended definition of extremist activity. Harsher penalties for offenses related to extremism have also been introduced. This may have a chilling effect on the functioning of civil society at large. I continue to urge the repeal of the "foreign agents" law, which is damaging to the activities of civil society and, I believe, to society as a whole. I also deplore last month's legislation to decriminalise violence within the family if it results in "minor harm ". Domestic violence is no different from other forms of violence in requiring appropriate responses from the criminal justice system.   
  
Mr President,  
  
I deplore the violence and destruction in South Sudan, where famine is spreading. As the First Vice President reminded me last week, the country was born out of a desire for human rights – but with people from more tribes, across an increasingly wider swathe of the country, becoming affected by atrocities and engaging in the conflict, that idea has been betrayed. The opposing forces – including the national army – have repeatedly engaged in alleged war crimes, including killings, rape and sexual violence, extortion, disappearances, pillage, and the burning of houses. It is essential to establish adequate accountability for these crimes. I am concerned about heavy-handed repression of freedom of expression, arbitrary arrests, and detention without trial, without access by UNMISS. Threats were issued against civil society representatives who met with the Security Council mission in our Juba premises last September.   
  
My Office recently reported a number of severe human rights violations in the Kasais and Lomani provinces of the Democratic Republic of the Congo. I commend the swift action taken by the Government to begin processes of investigation and accountability in some of the alleged killings attributed to soldiers, and offer the assistance of my Office. In light of recurrent reports of grave violations and the recent discovery of three more mass graves, I urge the Council establish a Commission of Inquiry to look into these allegations. My Office will be closely watching judicial developments in regard to actions by security forces which led to the deaths of more than 100 people in September and December. There has been no meaningful progress in the context of the political agreement of 31 December which resulted from the commendable mediation efforts of the National Council of Bishops.    
   
In Burundi, I am concerned that the democratic space has now been virtually extinguished. Grave human rights violations and abuses by security forces and the Imbonerakure militia continue to be reported, including increasing allegations of enforced disappearances, torture and mass arbitrary arrests. The recent decision to free up to 2,500 detainees is a positive sign, but hundreds of people remain in jail because of their real or perceived opposition to the Government. Following the release of the report by the UN Independent Investigation on Burundi in September 2016, the Government of Burundi suspended its cooperation with my Office in Burundi pending ongoing review of our MOU.   
  
I am deeply troubled by the serious deterioration of the human rights situation in the northern and central regions of Mali, including Mopti and Segou. Extremist groups continue their brutal oppression, including targeted killings and summary executions, sexual violence, and attacks on schools, forcing thousands of people to flee the area. It is essential that counter-terrorism operations conducted by all national and international forces be carried out in accordance with international human rights law and international humanitarian law. Whenever such operations violate human rights, they weaken their support base in the population – and this can only strengthen the extremist groups. Rising attacks against humanitarian convoys and representatives of national and international organisations are also deeply worrying, as they may deprive these regions of essential services. There is a serious need to ensure accountability for these and other human rights violations committed in the area.   
  
Mr President.  
  
In the Occupied Palestinian Territory, after half a century of Israeli occupation, with the degradation of another people which it brings, the accumulation of despair is widespread. Pervasive discrimination deprives Palestinians of their basic rights. I have repeatedly called for an end to the prolonged detention without trial of large numbers of detainees. Despite Security Council resolution 2334, the Israeli government has authorised over 5500 new settlement units in the Occupied Palestinian Territory since the beginning of the year. Last month the Knesset passed a law “legalising” under Israeli law outposts built on land owned by Palestinians. This amounts to the confiscation of private property, and contravenes international law. Israel's blockade of Gaza, which amounts to collective punishment, continues to deprive people of access to even basic goods and services. And while I repeat my alarm over unguided rockets sporadically fired by Palestinian armed groups from populated areas toward civilian areas in Israel – which are violations of international humanitarian law – I am similarly concerned that Israeli responses often do not meet the principles of distinction, proportionality, and precaution. Such policies cannot lay the ground for the peace and security which all Israelis, and all Palestinians, have a right to expect.  
  
In the State of Palestine, my Office is also concerned that both the Palestinian Authority and the authorities in Gaza have increased use of administrative and arbitrary detention, with increasing allegations of torture and ill-treatment in both the West Bank and Gaza against political opponents, journalists and activists. In Gaza, courts continue to pronounce death sentences, and executions are carried out in violation of Palestinian policy. You will receive a more comprehensive briefing later during this session.   
   
The conflict in Iraq continues to cause large numbers of civilian casualties and deaths. My Office and UNAMI receive daily reports of ISIL atrocities against civilians, including against people attempting to flee from areas under ISIL control. In areas retaken by Government forces from ISIL, at least 20 mass grave sites have been identified since October 2016 and in light of the grave crimes committed in Iraq, including war crimes and crimes against humanity, I urge that all such evidence of potential violations be collected and documented. With regards to the operations conducted in Mosul, the Iraqi Government is making efforts to adhere to the principles of international humanitarian law. I urge the Government to continue to monitor the conduct of Iraqi security forces. It is also essential that the Government amend the Criminal Code to ensure domestic courts have jurisdiction over international crimes. I further encourage extensive dialogue within and between communities to rebuild mutual trust and support national reconciliation. My Office is eager to assist the Government to build national justice institutions which can meet the very challenging issues it faces, including the need to re-establish law enforcement and rule of law in areas recaptured from ISIL.    
  
In Egypt, civil society, human rights defenders, journalists and media professionals are being methodically silenced by arrests, prosecutions, travel bans, closure orders and severely punitive financial measures. I particularly regret the recent compulsory closure of a centre renowned for its care for victims and survivors of torture and violence. The escalation of violence against military and civilian targets in the Sinai by armed groups affiliated with ISIS, and clashes with security forces, have resulted in hundreds of civilian casualties, and have sparked a worrying displacement from the area. My Office has received reports of alleged enforced disappearances, and torture and ill-treatment of detainees. I urge the authorities to recognise that, as in all countries facing security challenges and violent extremism, depriving people of their rights will not make the State safer, but more unstable.   
  
In Bahrain, the Government has imposed increasing restrictions on civil society and political groups since June 2016, including intimidation, arrests and interrogations, travel bans and closure orders. I repeat that this repression will not eliminate people’s grievances; it will increase them. I am deeply concerned over the increasing levels of human rights violations in the Kingdom. I call on the Government of Bahrain to undertake concrete confidence building measures, including allowing my Office and Special Procedures mandate holders to swiftly conduct visits.  
  
Mr President,   
  
I am increasingly concerned about the extreme polarisation in Venezuela, with continued restrictions on the freedoms of movement, association, expression and peaceful protest. I am also disturbed by the lack of independence of rule of law and national human rights institutions. My Office continues to receive reports of arbitrary detention and intimidation of opposition leaders, and I repeat my calls for the release of all political detainees, many of whom we believe were detained arbitrarily. As the economic and social crisis in Venezuela deepens, we have received reports of a marked increase in Venezuelans arriving in neighbouring countries, and I urge authorities to ensure appropriate support. Shortages of medicine and food across the country, and spiralling prices, are severely affecting economic and social rights. I welcome mediation efforts by the Vatican, and encourage further respect of human rights as a common ground for resuming political dialogue.  
  
In the United States of America, I am concerned by the new Administration's handling of a number of human rights issues. Greater and more consistent leadership is needed to address the recent surge in discrimination, anti-Semitism, and violence against ethnic and religious minorities. Vilification of entire groups such as Mexicans and Muslims, and false claims that migrants commit more crimes than US citizens, are harmful and fuel xenophobic abuses. I am dismayed at attempts by the President to intimidate or undermine journalists and judges. I am also concerned about new immigration policies that ban admission of people from six predominantly Muslim countries for 90 days, as well as policies which greatly expand the number of migrants at immediate risk of deportation – without regard for years spent in the US or family roots. These threaten to vastly increase use of detention, including of children. Expedited deportations could amount to collective expulsions and refoulement, in breach of international law, if undertaken without due process guarantees, including individual assessment. I am especially disturbed by the potential impact of these changes on children, who face being detained, or may see their families torn apart.  
  
Across many parts of Central and Latin America, people engaged in defending land rights and the environment from extractive industries and development projects face acute danger, including murder and violent attacks. Among them are numerous leaders of indigenous communities, whose civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights continue to be widely abused throughout the region, despite adoption of the American Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples last year. No development projects should be financed without extensive public deliberation and consultation with the directly affected communities that is free from intimidation.  
  
Widespread criminal violence in the region, compounded by shortcomings in the judicial system, and in security operations, have severe and deadly impact in prison administration. In Brazil, gang violence killed more than 100 detainees in a two-week period this January. In Haiti, more than 40 detainees died in the past two months as a result of poor health-care and nutrition. Combatting severe overcrowding and parallel systems of governance within prisons are among key human rights recommendations that need to be urgently addressed.   
  
Mr President,   
  
2017 may be a pivotal year in many respects. Will the vicious attacks by terrorist groups thrust governments deeper into security-heavy responses, further heightening the likelihood of abuses, at the expense of human rights? And will the populists continue to reap the rewards of stoked-up fear and disillusionment?  Together with other authoritarian-minded leaders, will they tip the international system over the edge?  Or will there be enough people who realise clearly and deeply what is at stake – who see the entire rights-based system is under attack – and reverse the centrifugal forces which threaten to break apart international and regional institutions? Will they strengthen the centripetal forces the 2030 Agenda so desperately needs, to put an end to extreme poverty and benefit all societies?   
  
The work in this Council, on this stage, or through the UN, can only be meaningful if it reflects accurately the space beyond it, and then changes those conditions for the better. And out there, 2017 will begin to answer for us the question, so simple, and yet filled with such power and consequence: will we continue to work together to improve the lot of all? Or do we, for various narrower reasons, begin to take leave of the multilateral approach? The question would then seem to be, Mr. President: are we all together – or do we fall together?   
  
I thank you very much.