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Human Rights Council 16th Session



OFFICE OF THE HIGH COMMISSIONER FOR HUMAN RIGHTS

Opening Statement by

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United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights

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Mr. President,
Distinguished Members of the Human Rights Council,
Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

This session of the Human Rights Council opens in historic turbulent times as massive popular movements in the Middle East demand change for human rights and democracy.

Chanting "Bread, Freedom and Human Dignity", demonstrators in the Middle East denounce the corrosive effects of abuses of human rights on their livelihoods and dignity. From city-street to city-street, their uproar made clear that despair was not acquiescence.

And today we commemorate the victims of the uprisings who have lost their lives or have been injured as they shouted truth to power and claimed their rights. It is a matter of great sadness that so much blood has been shed to usher in change.

Let me reiterate that the illegal and excessively heavy-handed response of a number of governments is unacceptable. Repression of peaceful expression of dissent is also intolerable. I remind all those concerned that widespread and systematic attacks against the civilian population may amount to crimes under international law. Attacks must be independently investigated and those responsible for them must be held to account. UN Security Council resolution 1970, passed unanimously last Saturday, gives the international community a solid platform for action. It imposes sanctions against the Libyan authorities, striking them with an arms embargo and freezing the assets of its leaders, while referring the ongoing violent repression of civilian demonstrators to the International Criminal Court.

The rights of the protesters must be upheld, and asylum seekers, migrants, and other foreign nationals fleeing the violence must be protected.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is important that the changes now spurred by the uprisings take root before former entrenched interests begin to reassert themselves, or new threats emerge. Protestors have voiced concern over the fact that the international community has all too often prioritized the stability of the political status quo and unhampered trade in natural resources over human rights.

Our interlocutors in the Middle East know that when euphoria wears thin, the hard task of rebuilding trust in institutions of governance and among communities needs to start in earnest. The international community bears the great responsibility of extending its support in words and deeds to assist such indispensable reforms. It must do so with dispatch and firmness.

As High Commissioner for Human Rights, I have been asking myself what my Office can do to help prevent violence and maximize the new opportunities that the uprisings have created.

Advocacy and help in building institutional capacity are obvious and, indeed, imperative avenues to pursue. Ensuring that victims of current and past abuses receive the justice they are entitled to is a priority. And these are the requests that are conveyed to my Office on a daily basis from many constituencies in the Middle East. We stand ready to assist.

I underscore once again that the recent protests have been sparked by harsh economic conditions, a suffocating political environment, lack to justice, and a sense of hopelessness. Seeking responses to such conditions and helping others pursuing solutions fit squarely within the Council's mandate to promote and protect all human rights for all.

The Council made a principled stand in convening a special session that resolved to mandate investigations into the violations of human rights and recommended a suspension of Libya's membership from the Council. The Council should not relax its vigilance over Libya as the threat of violent reprisals against civilians still looms.

Indeed, vigilance over rights that are at risk and responsiveness to the cries of the victims continue to be responsibilities of the tallest order for this Council.

I feel compelled to make this point, since the Council has embarked in the first review of its work. I am hopeful that this review will become a springboard for better honing the Council's skills and tools.

The common responsibility we undertook to make human rights a universal reality should spur greater accountability for action on human rights.

Without doubt, the work of the Council has led to significant achievements. The Universal Periodic Review is its most cited innovative feature. It embodies the principles of universality, equality and cooperation. Yet the review is just a means to an end, and only one among the many tools the Council possesses to advance protection of human rights.

The Council has not, in my view, explored its potential to the maximum. I urge Member States to evaluate all realistic options which, together with the Universal Periodic Review and the work of the independent experts, may enable the Council to deal better with long-neglected human rights conditions and urgent situations. As the Middle East experience shows, it is invariably the former that ignites the latter.

It is important to recall that this body commands credibility through action—nothing else. Dialogue and collaboration beyond political considerations and partisanship are crucial. You must close the gap between pledging rhetoric and willingness to actually deliver.

Progress is within reach and is yours to attain.

I wish you a productive session.

Thank you.