

## **HUMAN RIGHTS COUNCIL OPENS TWENTY-FOURTH SESSION, HEARS UPDATE FROM HIGH COMMISSIONER ON THE ACTIVITIES OF HER OFFICE**

Also Hears Addresses from Minister of Justice and Human Rights of Honduras and Prime Minister of Thailand

9 September 2013

The Human Rights Council this morning opened its twenty-fourth regular session, hearing an update from the High Commissioner for Human Rights on the activities of her Office, followed by a general debate. The Council also heard statements from the Minister of Justice and Human Rights of Honduras and the Prime Minister of Thailand.

Remigiusz A. Henczel, President of the Human Rights Council, hoped that a constructive and consensual spirit would continue to prevail in the Council throughout the session. Council resolution 16/21 was recalled, which strongly rejected any act of intimidation or reprisal against individuals and groups who cooperated or had cooperated with the United Nations, its representatives and human rights mechanisms and urged States to prevent and ensure adequate protection against such acts.

Navi Pillay, United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, presenting an update on the activities of her Office, said with regards to Syria that the international community was very late to take serious joint action to halt the downward spiral that had gripped Syria. This appalling situation cried out for international action, yet a military response or the continued supply of arms risked igniting a regional conflagration, possibly resulting in more deaths and even more widespread misery. The High Commissioner also referred to Iraq, Egypt, Bahrain, Turkey, Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories, Sri Lanka, among others. Reference was also made to issues concerning the Roma in European countries, migrants and refugees, discrimination, the economic crisis and food security, among others.

Ana Pineda, Minister of Justice and Human Rights of Honduras, said that Honduras recognised the fact that the Human Rights Council played a transcendental role in encouraging States to meet their human rights obligations worldwide. Concerted efforts were needed to put an end to violence, which generated displacement of many as well as violations of human rights. In Honduras, assistance and technical and financial cooperation offered by the Office of the High Commissioner had been determinant in ensuring complementarity on the ground to improve the situation of human rights in the country.

Yingluck Shinawatra, Prime Minister of Thailand, said the words of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights 60 years ago remained important for everyone who believed in freedom and the events in Syria reminded everyone of that. It was important that the Human Rights Council pursued its mandate to make governments accountable. The international community in its turn could not turn a blind eye. Women and children remained subject to intolerable discrimination, and human trafficking persisted as a problem for women in Thailand and around the world.

In the general debate that followed the update by the High Commissioner, speakers expressed concern about the situation in Syria, with strong condemnation of the chemical attack of 21 August as well as condemnation for all acts of violence and the violations of international humanitarian and human rights law committed by all parties. Speakers also referred to the situation in Egypt, and condemned the outbreak of violence. Concerns were also expressed with regards to violations of the human rights of the Palestinian people, as well as with regards to situations in Bahrain, Myanmar, Central African Republic and South Sudan, among others. Also raised in the discussion were concerns about the impact of the national security surveillance regimes in a number of western countries and the continued social exclusion and segregation of Roma in many European States. Much remained to be done in all countries of the world to protect the rights of children, women, migrants, indigenous peoples and minorities.

Speaking in the general debate were Pakistan on behalf of the Organization for Islamic Cooperation, Switzerland on behalf of the Cross Regional Group, Gabon on behalf of the African Group, Iran on behalf of the Non-Aligned Movement, Lithuania on behalf of the European Union, Qatar, Italy, Ireland, United States, Chile, Sierra Leone, Peru, Guatemala, Czech Republic, Germany, Japan, Austria, Kuwait, Pakistan, Ethiopia, Maldives, Romania, Republic of Moldova, Malaysia and Indonesia.

The Human Rights Council will resume its work this afternoon at 3 p.m. when it will continue the general debate on the update by the High Commissioner. It will also hear from the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for children and armed conflict, followed by an

interactive dialogue.

### **Opening Statement**

REMIGIUSZ A. HENCZEL, President of the Human Rights Council, hoped that a constructive and consensual spirit would continue to prevail in the Council throughout the session. He recalled the Council resolution 16/21, which strongly rejected any act of intimidation or reprisal against individuals and groups who cooperated or had cooperated with the United Nations, its representatives and human rights mechanisms and urged States to prevent and ensure adequate protection against such acts. He referred to the proposed new system for the inscription on the list of speakers for interactive dialogues and panel discussions, which would allow for a fair and transparent process.

### **Statement by the High Commissioner for Human Rights**

NAVI PILLAY, United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, presenting an update on the activities of her Office, said that today the number of dead in Syria stood at over 100,000 and the suffering of Syria's civilian population had reached unimaginable levels. The use of chemical weapons had long been identified as one of the gravest crimes that could be committed, yet their use in Syria now seemed to be in little doubt, even if all the circumstances and responsibilities remained to be clarified. The international community was very late to take serious joint action to halt the downward spiral that had gripped Syria, slaughtering its people and destroying its cities. This was no time for powerful States to continue to disagree on the way forward, or for geopolitical interests to override the legal and moral obligation to save lives by bringing this conflict to an end. This appalling situation cried out for international action, yet a military response or the continued supply of arms risked igniting a regional conflagration, possibly resulting in more deaths and even more widespread misery. States, together with the United Nations, must find a way to bring the warring parties to the negotiating table and halt the bloodshed. In Iraq, the authorities were called upon to do the utmost to protect all people in Iraq and urged to ensure the investigation announced into the recent deplorable killing of at least 52 people in Camp Ashraf was fully independent, thorough and transparent. There was alarm at continuing violence in Egypt and the High Commissioner called for independent and transparent investigations into all the killings and other violations that had occurred, both in recent weeks and in earlier periods. The path to stability in Egypt lay in its ability to establish the rule of law in an inclusive manner that ensured that all Egyptians were recognised as legitimate stakeholders in the future of their country.

The High Commissioner reiterated her call on Bahrain to fully comply with its international human rights commitments, including respect for the rights to freedoms of expression, peaceful assembly and association. The Turkish Government was urged to seriously address the issue of policing and to carry out systemic reforms in this area with the support of the whole United Nations system. There was concern about Israel's continued policy of forced evictions and demolitions in the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, and of the possible excessive use of force by Israeli security forces against Palestinian civilians during recent search and arrest operations in refugee camps in the West Bank. Likewise, there was concern about the possible excessive use of force by Palestinian security forces in the West Bank. The High Commissioner also referred to Sri Lanka, Colombia, South Sudan, Myanmar, Tunisia, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Mali, the Central African Republic, the United States, and the United Kingdom. The High Commissioner was disturbed by the continued social exclusion and segregation of Roma in many European States. Migrants and refugees continued to be subjected to discrimination and xenophobia in many countries.

Ms. Pillay said the causes of the economic crisis were themselves human rights questions, representing as they did a gross failure of the rule of law in the financial sector and in the economic sphere more broadly. It was essential that Member States renewed their commitment to the right to food as a human right and embraced a human rights-based approach to nutrition and hunger as well as addressing structural causes. The alarming pattern of brutality and widespread intolerance against lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people in all regions was also highlighted. The independent regular review of States by the United Nations human rights treaty bodies was a key element of the international community's system for not only providing early warning of emerging human rights crises, but also for supporting robust national systems to avoid such crises arising in the first place. Racism was universally condemned, but far too many people were still victimized because they belonged to a particular group. The Security Council had requested that peace missions systematically prioritize human rights protection activities in the deployment of capacity and resources. The High Commissioner reiterated that a consistent application of the Human Rights Due Diligence Policy would bring important benefits

to both Member States and the United Nations system.

**General Debate on the Update on the Activities of the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights**

Pakistan, speaking on behalf of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, said that the extreme concern voiced by the High Commissioner over civilian suffering in Syria was shared by the Organization of Islamic Cooperation. Support was also offered for her comments regarding ongoing challenges with respect to Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar. The Organization of Islamic Cooperation urged Israel to ease what it considered to be a policy of repression of the human rights of Palestinian people. In addition, the Organization of Islamic Cooperation had consistently raised its reservation over the notions that had not been universally agreed by the United Nations system about lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender rights, and therefore could not support any initiative by the High Commissioner in this respect.

Switzerland, speaking on behalf of the Cross Regional Group, took note of positive steps taken by the Government of Bahrain to implement the recommendations of the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry in order to improve the human rights situation in Bahrain. However, the human rights situation in Bahrain remained an issue of serious concern to the Group. They continued to be concerned about the continued harassment and imprisonment of persons exercising their rights to freedom of opinion and expression, including human rights defenders. The Group was also concerned about the cases of revocation of nationality without due process, some of which might lead to statelessness, and that those alleged to have committed human rights violations were often not held accountable.

Gabon, speaking on behalf the African Group, thanked the High Commissioner for her comments regarding the alarming human rights situation worldwide and cautioned against the politicization of human rights. In Africa, it had to be ensured that the Central African Republic did not collapse into anarchy and the situation there depended on the support of the international community. Intercommunity violence in South Sudan was deplored while elections in Mali and Zimbabwe were welcomed. The African Group expressed its deep concern over the ongoing phenomenon of racism. It also hoped to exert ongoing influence on the formulation of development rights as part of the post-2015 development agenda.

Iran, speaking on behalf of the Non-Aligned Movement, thanked the High Commissioner for providing the Council with an informative report on important human rights issues and shared the serious concerns expressed by the High Commissioner over Israel's continued policy of forced evictions and demolitions. The Non-Aligned Movement was also extremely disturbed by the human rights situation in Syria and condemned all acts of violence and the violations of international humanitarian and human rights law committed by all parties, as well as the use of chemical weapons. The Non-Aligned Movement shared the concerns raised over the impact of the national security surveillance regimes in a number of western countries and the continued social exclusion and segregation of Roma in many European States. The Movement expressed its regrets that ongoing trends of racist and Islamophobic acts had not been addressed in the report of the High Commissioner.

Lithuania, speaking on behalf of the European Union, said the European Union was alarmed by the reports of the use of chemicals weapons in Syria. The European Union was appalled by the continued widespread and systematic gross violations of human rights and abuses and condemned the atrocities committed by the Syrian regime. The European Union reaffirmed that there must be no impunity for such violations and called on the Syrian authorities to grant immediate and unrestricted access to the Commission of Inquiry. The European Union commended the High Commissioner's efforts to respond to recent developments in Egypt and condemned all acts of violence, including the bomb attack in Cairo on September 5. The European Union welcomed Egypt's readiness to host a regional office in Cairo and supported OHCHR's request to deploy human rights officers to assess the situation on the ground.

Qatar shared the concerns expressed by the High Commissioner regarding Syria. The killing of hundreds of innocent civilians was unacceptable. International law should not be ignored and the international community had the responsibility to protect civilians from the Syrian regime. Accountability had to be ensured for those who committed crimes against humanity. The forced eviction of Palestinians in the occupied territories was a flagrant violation of the legitimate rights of the Palestinians. Qatar condemned the human rights violations of the Muslims in Myanmar.

Italy said it had condemned in the strongest terms the chemical weapons attack of August 21 in Syria; it was a blatant violation of international law and a crime of war and against humanity. Those responsible must be held to account and brought to justice, and the Security Council was urged to defer them to the International Criminal Court. The force used by the Egyptian security forces against protestors was brutal, disproportionate and unjustifiable, while all acts of terror and sectarian violence must also be unequivocally condemned.

Ireland hoped that the Egyptian Government would show wisdom and vision and move to heal divisions in a divided land, not widen them. Egypt could not go forward towards the future its people deserved unless a political house broad enough for all its people was built. With regards to Syria, there was an urgent need for justice for the victims of the most serious crimes and a responsibility on all members of the international community to do all in their power to urge the parties to commit themselves to a political process to bring peace.

United States said it had condemned the excessive force used by Egyptian security forces against civilian protesters, and called for an independent, impartial and transparent investigation into the recent violence. The Government was expected to respect the Egyptian people's longstanding demand that due process be respected, a standard which was not currently the case in military and State security courts. The United States highlighted the continued need to protect the fundamental freedoms of peaceful assembly and association.

Chile thanked the High Commissioner for her statement, and condemned the use of chemical weapons in Syria. Quoting His Holiness Pope Francis, Chile warned against any furtherance of violence in Syria as a response to the use of chemical weapons. Investigations into human rights violations in Egypt were urgent and Chile supported the call of the High Commissioner for representation in Cairo. Chile was also fully engaged in the work of the Council and would participate actively in future human rights initiatives.

Sierra Leone noted the dramatic increase in deaths in Syria since the High Commissioner first raised the conflict in the Human Rights Council in 2011, and unless there was a show of will by all actors to deal with it, the hard work of the Council would have limited impact. Threats to human rights should not be allowed to turn into crises, and past lessons had to be heeded. Turning to development rights, Sierra Leone said it had direct experience of how poverty could lead to violence and it supported the High Commissioner's continued focus on economic, social and cultural rights, particularly with respect to the post-2015 development agenda.

Peru said it rejected the use of chemical weapons in Syria as a gross violation of human rights and called on all parties to lay down arms. The outcome of the report by the United Nations inspectors remained an important element of the ongoing search for a political situation in Syria. Peru called for an ongoing dialogue in Egypt in the search for a political settlement there, and echoed the call of the High Commissioner for representation in Cairo.

Guatemala thanked the Office of the High Commissioner for the support provided for the promotion and protection of human rights in Guatemala. Much remained to be done in all countries of the world to protect the rights of children, women, migrants, indigenous peoples and minorities. The effects of the economic crisis should not slow down the protection of human rights. Human rights had to be taken into account in the post-2015 development agenda. Guatemala called on all parties involved in armed conflicts to resolve disputes through negotiation and to respect human rights.

The Czech Republic condemned the spree of violence in Egypt, including the use of force by the security forces and acts of violent extremism. The Czech Republic called on Egypt to restore democracy and civilian government through an inclusive and transparent political process in accordance with international standards and welcomed Egypt's readiness to host a regional office of the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights in Cairo. The Czech Republic commended the High Commissioner's efforts aiming at the opening of an office in Myanmar.

Germany commended the High Commissioner for the outstanding efforts to cover human rights developments worldwide and on all issues. All those responsible for gross and systematic violations and abuses of human rights committed in Syria should be brought to justice. Germany supported the efforts undertaken to get access to Egypt for OHCHR staff and called on Egypt to fully cooperate with the Office of the High Commissioner and any United Nations Special Rapporteur who may wish to visit the country. Germany asked for information on the state of the discussions with Myanmar regarding the establishment of a field office.

Japan said that it shared the strong concern about Syria where serious armed violence continued, and was deeply concerned by the reports that chemical weapons were used on 21 August and that large numbers of citizens were killed, including women and children. The use of chemical weapons was not permissible under any circumstances. Japan looked forward to the oral update from the Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea. Japan also looked forward to the support of the Council Members and Observers for the resolution it would table at this session with regards to Cambodia.

Austria said that the situation in Syria had been further aggravated as the reports on the use of chemical weapons showed. Austria stressed that international humanitarian and human rights law clearly and absolutely prohibited the use of chemical weapons. The international community had to make sure that the enormous human suffering did not increase. Only a peaceful solution could stop the bloodshed. Austria had followed developments in Egypt with great concern. Egypt was called upon to initiate a credible national dialogue and constitutional reform process, including all stakeholders.

Kuwait noted that the Office was under increasing pressure to promote and protect human rights around the world. Concern was expressed regarding the violation of the human rights of the Palestinian people. Kuwait looked to the international community to put an end to this humanitarian tragedy by implementing all United Nations resolutions. Kuwait reiterated its support to the efforts made by Egypt to achieve a better future and condemned the terrorism and violence faced by the Government. Kuwait condemned the use of chemical weapons against civilians in Syria.

Pakistan said that counter-terrorism operations should be allowed within the ambit of the United Nations Charter and international human rights law but objected to the legal basis of drone strikes as a frequent target country for them. Pakistan said it considered drone strikes to be counterproductive and it was grateful for the focus on the legality of drone strikes within the human rights framework given by the Human Rights Council. Pakistan also welcomed the work of the Council with respect to privacy rights.

Ethiopia welcomed the High Commissioner's focus on the plight of migrants, particularly that faced by women and children migrants. The right to development had to be included in the post-2015 development agenda to protect against the impacts of climate change and economic shocks and ensure agricultural productivity and food security. Ethiopia had successfully implemented a five-year growth plan which included a human rights plank in June.

Maldives said the situation in Syria had for far too long eluded a comprehensive response from the international community and condemned the use of chemical weapons by the Syrian authorities. The Syrian authorities had to be held accountable for these actions. The Maldives backed a political settlement in Syria agreed to by all sides. It was also deeply concerned by political instability in Egypt and called for a national dialogue. Meanwhile, the Maldives reported that it had successfully held the first-round of a presidential election this month that had been conducted in a free, fair and transparent manner.

Romania condemned the massacres committed and the human rights violations in Syria, some of them amounting to crimes against humanity and war crimes, as shown in the reports of the Commission of Inquiry. Romania commended the work of the Commission and called on the Government to grant access to its members to the Syrian territory. Romania also deplored the violence and loss of lives in Egypt and hoped that all parties would make efforts to avoid the recurrence of such events. Romania commended the attention paid by the High Commissioner to the Central African Republic and looked forward to the report on the human rights situation in this country.

The Republic of Moldova said that concrete steps had to be taken to stop the suffering of Syria's population and reiterated its support for referring the case to the International Criminal Court. The Republic of Moldova welcomed the decision to establish a regional office in Cairo, as was the case for a country office in Myanmar. It commended the adoption of a gender equality strategic plan by the Office of the High Commissioner and informed the Council that the Government had adopted the second Action Plan for 2013-2015 on ensuring gender equality. The safety of journalists and the issue of the death penalty remained of concern and must continue to bear the corresponding international attention.

Malaysia said that any effort to bring a conflict to an end should be carefully measured so as not to perpetuate or aggravate the suffering of those they intended to protect. In this regard, Malaysia did not support a foreign military intervention in Syria and called on all parties to end the violence through negotiations. The Palestinians had long suffered from the repression and

atrocities perpetrated by Israel and impunity should not be allowed to continue. The economic crisis had raised the spectre of food insecurity, which demanded comprehensive efforts to address price volatility and food distribution. The Council should therefore renew its commitment to the right to food.

Indonesia shared the High Commissioner's view, with regards to Syria, that there was no easy exit and no obvious pathway out of this nightmare, except the immediate negotiation of concrete steps to end the conflict. Once again, they learned about Israel's blatant violations of international human rights laws. This unfortunate trend deserved the international community's full attention and consideration. Indonesia noted with appreciation the High Commissioner's continued calls and legitimate concern underscoring the human rights dimension of the current economic crisis.

**Keynote Statements by the Minister of Justice and Human Rights of Honduras and the Prime Minister of Thailand**

ANA PINEDA, Minister of Justice and Human Rights of Honduras, said that Honduras recognised the fact that the Human Rights Council played a transcendental role in encouraging States to meet their human rights obligations worldwide. Concerted efforts were needed to put an end to violence, which generated displacement of many as well as violations of human rights. In Honduras, assistance and technical and financial cooperation offered by the Office of the High Commissioner had been determinant in ensuring complementarity on the ground to improve the situation of human rights in the country. Honduras had received visits from the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders and human rights, the Special Rapporteur on the sale of children, the Special Rapporteur on freedom of expression, the Working Group on the use of mercenaries, and of the Sub Committee for the prevention of torture and other cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment. Honduras fully agreed with what had been said this morning by the High Commissioner regarding having an independent and regular review by human rights treaty bodies, which was key to potentially avoiding emerging crises. While Honduras recognised the many efforts undertaken in the effective investigation and fight against impunity, these were not sufficient to ensure access to justice and better security of citizens. During this session Honduras, along with other countries, would present two important resolutions in the area of technical cooperation which it hoped would be broadly supported by the Council.

YINGLUCK SHINAWATRA, Prime Minister of Thailand, said the words of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights 60 years ago remained important for everyone who believed in freedom. The events in Syria reminded everyone of that. It was important that the Human Rights Council pursued its mandate to make governments accountable. The international community in its turn could not turn a blind eye. The pursuit of the human rights agenda required dialogue and the enhancement of technical cooperation between governments. That was why Thailand was sponsoring initiatives to enhance technical cooperation and capacity building within the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights. Women and children remained subject to intolerable discrimination, and human trafficking persisted as a problem for women in Thailand and around the world. As the first woman Prime Minister of Thailand, Ms. Shinawatra said she had launched a number of initiatives aimed at women as victims of sexual and domestic violence and other gender-specific human rights issues. She paid tribute to the work of the High Commissioner as a fellow woman leader and said that Thailand had submitted its bid to join the Human Rights Council in the 2015-2017 period. Thailand – the name meant land of the free – remained committed to the principles and spirit of human rights and the international bodies charged with upholding them.

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