

Mannréttindaráð Sameinuðu þjóðanna
Ræða Guðlaugs Þórs Þórðarsonar utanríkisráðherra
Genf, 26. febrúar 2018

Mr. President,
Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

This year, as we celebrate the seventieth anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, it is appropriate to go back to basics.

Article 1 pretty much says it all: “All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights.”

How can *anyone* object to the thought and meaning inherent in these words?

Article 2 also states very clearly that “everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration”.

Article 3 is short and to the point: “Everyone has the right to life, liberty and security of person.”

I am reciting some articles of this fundamental document because many of the issues facing this body, the Human Rights Council, would unfortunately suggest that not every member state of the United Nations

is shouldering its responsibility - to fully respect the rights of all human beings under the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Governments were not coerced by the UN or anyone else into creating the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. It was created because it seemed imperative, after the horrors of the Second World War, to create a better world where everyone would have full and equal human rights.

So why does not everyone live up to the ideals of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and why are we living in a period when, according to the High Commissioner, there is an increasing tendency to try and negate and deny the value of human rights?

Mr. President,

I take this opportunity to recognize and applaud the work of the High Commissioner who has shown courage in speaking out about negative trends in the field of global human rights. And while I am an optimist by nature, one has to agree with the High Commissioner that we are falling short on too many fronts.

But what can be done when states violate the commitments they have taken upon themselves to respect and who is to hold them accountable? Can we not agree that it is primarily *us* – other states that have taken upon ourselves to accept these obligations? We should not

point towards the UN as some body unrelated to the states that make up its membership. *We must hold each other to account.*

Mr. President,

Last year, Iceland took the lead in this body in highlighting the human rights situation in the Philippines and were joined in our statements by close to 40 states.

We shared our concerns over the methods, used by the Government of the Philippines, in their “war on drugs”, and we urged the Government to take all necessary measures to bring unlawful killings to an end, and to cooperate with the international community to pursue appropriate investigations in keeping with universal principles of democratic accountability and the rule of law.

We welcome reports that the Philippines have indicated that they may be willing to cooperate with the UN to allow an objective assessment of the human rights situation in the country. We would like to take this opportunity to urge the Philippines to continue on that path and to accept, without preconditions or limitations, a visit from the UN Special Rapporteur and to cooperate with the Office of the High Commissioner to receive a mission by independent experts to conduct such an assessment without delay.

The International Criminal Court announced earlier this month that it will conduct a preliminary examination into killings linked to the Philippine government's "war on drugs."

This is an important development – but it does not take the responsibility away from this body to fulfill its duty to monitor, investigate and to deliberate, and take further steps, including a more formal Council initiative if the need arises, to try and ensure the Philippines meets its human rights obligations.

Mr. President,

It should be noted, that the Philippines is currently an elected member of the Human Rights Council.

So too is the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, recently accused of widespread and arbitrary arrests through its use of counter-terrorism and security laws, and the persecution of human rights defenders for peacefully exercising their fundamental rights.

So too is Venezuela, a country which has in recent months and years witnessed excessive use of force by security officers, and multiple other human rights violations, in the context of anti-Government protests.

Egypt is also a member of the Council and yet the High Commissioner has recently informed us of reports of oppressive measures by the Government, including increasing waves of arrests,

allegations of torture in detention, extra-judicial killings and restrictions on human rights defenders.

States which join the Council should lead by example and expect their own human rights record to be subject to particular scrutiny during their time as members. If the Human Rights Council does not hold its own members to account to ensure they uphold the highest standards in the promotion and protection of human rights, then who will?

Mr. President,

We are *deeply* concerned over the terrible suffering of civilians in the never-ending conflicts in Syria and in Yemen. Recent images from Ghouta in Syria, and similar news reports from Yemen, have provoked, once again, strong reactions. The Security Council on Saturday agreed on a ceasefire which is a step in the right direction. However, it is imperative that we do our utmost to pressure those responsible to bring the killing to a complete stop and allow for humanitarian access to take place. The world *cannot* stand by, yet again, while massacres are being committed in broad daylight, and innocent women, children and men killed indiscriminately.

Mr. President,

Women's rights are human rights. For us, gender equality is a priority. For Icelanders it is a source of pride to be the frontrunner in

the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Index for the ninth year in a row. Ranking at the top is a confirmation of successes achieved in recent decades and inspires us to share with others, advocate changes and do better ourselves.

My Government is committed to eradicating gender-based wage discrimination at home and, inspired by the global #metoo revolution, we aim to eradicate sexual violence, including in the cybersphere. We aim to ratify soon the Istanbul Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence.

We will also continue to speak out, in this arena and elsewhere, on the rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex (LGBTI). At home, my Government aims to pass ambitious legislation on self-determination based on gender awareness. Abroad, I am happy to say that we plan to accept an invitation to join the *Equal Rights Coalition*, a partnership of 35 countries, where we hope to work with other like-minded countries to promote and protect the fundamental rights of LGBTI individuals.

Mr. President,

Last autumn, Iceland chaired the UN General Assembly's Third Committee and, in that capacity, we were proud to welcome to New York, for the first time, the Independent Expert on sexual orientation and gender identity - a function wisely established by this Council recently. During our chairmanship, the Committee passed almost sixty

resolutions, some of them regular items, but others brand new - such as the resolution on the human rights situation in Myanmar.

Mr. President,

As we celebrate the seventieth anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights we accept the challenge the High Commissioner has given us - to mobilize once more and strive to reach universal respect for, and observation of, the human rights and fundamental freedoms we so cherish.

Thank you.