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**Respect for Social Justice and Human Rights as the
Foundation for a Stable International Order: The COVID-19
Pandemic and the Importance of Upholding the United
Nations Human Rights System**

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While humanity continues to face an unprecedented multi-layered crisis due to the COVID-19 pandemic, I will highlight the growing significance of multilateralism and in particular, the United Nations (UN) human rights protection system. In that context, I will also underline the role of the UN convention system and its monitoring mechanism the treaty bodies in view of enhancing a stable international order.

It is a sad fact that human history has been shaped by tragedies. Just in the twentieth century, humanity has suffered from the fatal consequences of the two world wars. After each war, attempts were made to prevent the recurrence of such tragedies.

Following the Second World War, the international community designed the new international architecture, with the United Nations (UN) at the core of the system. This new system has been built on the basis of the UN Charter of 1945 and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948. The objective was to eliminate the recurrence of suffering and to create the conditions for enhancing unity through establishing a common legal space. Thus, the convention system based on common values has been jointly developed. Bearing in mind that the UN Charter emphasizes social justice and human rights as the foundation for a stable international order, this was a wise political move towards replacing conflict with dialogue and compromise through multilateral action aimed at establishing a rule-based international system. Regional organizations, including the Council of Europe (CoE) and the Organisation (earlier Conference) for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), have entered the stage to consolidate the global system.

Under the evolving international circumstances, and in particular in view of the COVID-19 pandemic which continues to impose an unforeseen impact on the international order,¹ it is essential for the international community to remain committed to promoting multilateralism, as well as the integrity and credibility of the convention system. It was political wisdom that created it. It is now for the international community to protect and promote the convention system to enhance peace, security and stability leading to prosperity.

The UN human rights treaties constitute the backbone of the international human rights architecture. They play a key role in the attempt to unify the international community on a common ground, enabling them to promote dialogue and multilateral action. The UN human rights treaty body system, established to monitor implementation of the UN human rights treaties and advise the States parties with a view to upgrading the standards, stands at the heart of the international human rights protection system.

It is now crucial to keep reforming the functioning of the system as we continue to face growing challenges. Some of these challenges are newly emerging. For example, rising populism in many parts of the world makes it difficult to build inclusive democratic societies. The growing issue of migrants and refugees is another challenge and humanity must make further progress in respecting the principles of responsibility and burden-sharing.

Under such circumstances, the international community must remain firmly committed to pursuing a progressive approach with a view to upholding the convention system and improving the efficiency of the treaty bodies.

Realizing this common objective requires a principled and coherent approach. First, it is essential to apply international law without any discrimination. It is important to bear in mind that human rights, like security, is indivisible. Selectively addressing certain categories and highlighting topics with regards to certain stakeholders undermine the common ground. It is therefore crucial that all standards are treated equally in respect of all.

UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres, in his remarks on the occasion of the 75th anniversary of the UN, articulated this principle eloquently:

*“Upholding all rights of all people is in the interests of everyone. Crucially, we cannot pick and choose which rights; the pursuit of all rights is essential to the attainment of any.”*²

¹ UNSG Antonio Guterres, in his remarks on 19 March 2020 titled “COVID-19: A Call for Solidarity”, described the situation as follows: “We are facing a global health crisis unlike any in the 75-year history of the UN – one that is spreading human suffering, infecting the global economy and upending people’s lives ... More than ever before, we need solidarity, hope and the political will to see this crisis through together.”

<https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/speeches/2020-03-19/remarks-virtual-press-encounter-covid-19-crisis>

² UNSG Antonio Guterres, The Highest Aspiration: A Call to Action for Human Rights, Geneva, 24 February 2020.

It is also vital to avoid politicization of legal matters in order to maintain the credibility of the convention system. Legal means should not be used for political ends.

There seems to be a continuing need to raise awareness for the importance of enhancing democratic security, which is essential for a stable order based on checks and balances. This should cover, *inter alia*, effectively functioning independent judiciary, freedom of expression, assembly and association as well as freedom of the media, transparent democratic institutions and inclusive societies.

In this context, we should also highlight the imperative of respect for the prohibition of torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment. As a peremptory norm of international law, it is a non-derogable right that must be respected under all circumstances.

Advanced democratic security would give impetus to efforts to upgrading human rights. This becomes vitally important at a time when we face rising populism with authoritarian tendencies, extremist movements, and radicalization leading to terrorism.

Furthermore, the culture of impunity needs to be addressed more effectively. Lack of deterrence, prevention and punishment for perpetrators of human rights violations hamper the efforts. States must be engaged more actively to develop measures to eliminate impunity.

Another important step is the need to apply the common standards with regard to anti-terrorism measures. The four pillars of the UN Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy³ must be further highlighted in human rights training programs. It is vital to stress that ensuring respect for human rights and the rule of law is a fundamental basis for the effective fight against terrorism.

Upholding the human rights treaties and ensuring efficiency of the treaty body system will remain among the shared responsibilities of the international community to realize the objectives set forth in the UN Charter and enhance democratic security. Under these evolving global circumstances, we must not lose sight of the increasing significance of multilateralism and the convention system, as well as the role of the treaty bodies in safeguarding a stable and democratic international order where everybody enjoys all human rights standards without discrimination of any kind.

<https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/speeches/2020-02-24/human-rights-council-remarks-the-highest-aspiration>

³ The four pillars of the UN Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy:

- Tackling the conditions conducive to the spread of terrorism;
- Preventing and combating terrorism;
- Building States' capacity and to strengthen the role of the UN;
- Ensuring respect for human rights and the rule of law as the fundamental basis for the fight against terrorism.

The COVID-19 pandemic is first and foremost a public health emergency. But it is also a humanitarian crisis that entails solidarity and coordination at all levels. While tackling the health emergency, States must give due consideration to the human rights aspect. UN High Commissioner Michelle Bachelet, in her address to the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva, referred to *“the creation of a more cooperative, global and human rights-based approach to the crisis”* and underlined *“the imperative of respect for civil and political rights during this crisis”*.⁴

For the sake of international stability, peace, security and prosperity, we, the human society, need to show solidarity and promote multilateral action to cope with the current challenges in order to ensure a better future. That requires upholding the UN human rights system.

⁴ HCHR Michelle Bachelet, Statement at the informal briefing to the Human Rights Council, Geneva, 9 April 2020
<https://www.ohchr.org/en/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=25785&LangID=E>