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Human Rights Committee

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Opening address by

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Palais Wilson, Geneva

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Madame Chairperson, Distinguished Members of the Committee, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is my special honour and pleasure, on behalf of the Secretary-General of the United Nations, to welcome you to the **one hundred and thirty-ninth session** of the Human Rights Committee. This is the last session of the seventy-fifth anniversary year of the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948. I would like to take the opportunity to look back and to consider how it has contributed to shaping the world we live in.

Consider that at the time of the adoption of the Universal Declaration, the world was seized by the euphoria of the post-war era, but also by the sober work of reconstruction. Soon thereafter, the world became polarized between two ideological camps that affected the way in which specific categories of human rights were viewed. For that reason, the translation of the Universal Declaration into binding treaty law in the form of the two Covenants would take nearly two decades more.

During that time, vociferous demands for self-determination were voiced, which led to their recognition as fully fledged human rights and the decolonization of vast stretches of the globe. The United Nations was fundamentally reshaped and began to resemble the real world just a little more. The world was seized by the hopes of the new nations achieving independence, but also by the sober work ahead of nation-building.

The end of the Cold War allowed us to reimagine what a just world would look like. The 1993 World Conference on Human Rights, the 30th anniversary of which we also commemorate this year, finally settled two artificial and wholly unnecessary debates about human rights. One was about national sovereignty and

non-interference. Laying to rest one of the most common justifications for inaction in the face of atrocities, the Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action asserted that "the promotion and protection of all human rights is a legitimate concern of the international community".

The second was about the hierarchy of human rights. As explained by the High Commissioner, "The Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action – the outcome of the Conference - infused the global consciousness with a straightforward yet pivotal formula for human rights: that you cannot have one human right without the other… The Vienna Declaration confirmed the conviction that human rights are universal, indivisible, interdependent, and interrelated, and boldly rejected the view that certain human rights could be considered optional."

This anniversary year is an occasion to recall the continued relevance of the Universal Declaration and the Covenant today. We are seeing a worrying rollback of human rights in places with a complex geopolitical backdrop. We are observing deepened divisions within and across countries, including along national, ethnic and religious lines. Meanwhile, new challenges urgently demand attention, not least those arising from the Triple Planetary Crisis of climate change, biodiversity loss and pollution. The right to life takes on new dimensions in this light. The treaty bodies, including this Committee, are increasingly dealing with the impact of environmental issues on the enjoyment of human rights, which we wholeheartedly welcome. Other new challenges include the urgent need to regulate new technologies and platforms by which human rights can be both protected AND also violated. Rapid developments in the way that State institutions function, particularly since the outbreak of the Covid pandemic, must be monitored closely.

There is a key difference between the human rights outlook 75 years ago and today, namely our ability to monitor events, recommend concrete actions before violations occur, and recommend remedies when they occur nonetheless. That difference is the work of this Committee, along with the work of the other treaty bodies and international human rights mechanisms, and beyond that, the growing numbers of national human rights institutions, regional mechanisms and the International Criminal Court. In other words, that difference is the emergence of a healthy human rights ecosystem that gives practical meaning to the human rights commitments made by States.

Madame Chair, Distinguished Members,

It is vital for this ecosystem to be reinforced. As you know, the Office of the High Commissioner continues to support the strengthening of the treaty bodies. We are confident that the conclusions adopted by the Chairs of the treaty bodies at their 35th annual meeting held in New York in May/June 2023, based on the OHCHR Working Paper on options for the development of an implementation plan for the predictable review calendar, the harmonization of working methods and the digital uplift, have the potential to significantly improve your work and that of the treaty body system as a whole. The Chairs "welcome[d] the Working Paper as an important step and a comprehensive, detailed, and technical tool to guide the consultations towards the implementation of the Chairs' conclusions, to provide possible elements for the next biennial General Assembly resolution on the human rights treaty body system in December 2024."

In New York, the Chairs focused their discussions on the harmonization of working methods and agreed, among other things, to establish a coordination mechanism for the simplification and harmonization of the Committees' working methods and substantive coordination on common and intersectional issues. The Chairs also considered the options for the rolling out of the 8-year predictable review calendar in practice, including intermittent follow-up reviews, and stated

that they are in line with the conclusions reached at their 34th annual meeting in 2022. The Chairs confirmed that any of the options for the introduction of an 8-year predictable schedule of reviews and the further digitalization of their work can and will be implemented by all human rights treaty bodies, if the necessary human, technical and financial resources can be provided by Member States.

While key decisions on these issues, including on resources, remain in the hands of Member States, the Secretary-General, the High Commissioner for Human Rights and the Assistant Secretary-General for Human Rights have expressed their firm commitment to continue supporting the treaty body strengthening process, including about the budgetary implications of the reform of the UN human rights treaty bodies. The High Commissioner will convene an informal briefing with Member States on 1 November 2023 in Geneva, to which you have all been invited, to solicit the views and preferences of Member States on the options and guiding questions in the OHCHR Working Paper. In a subsequent process, the High Commissioner intends to reach out to Member States in the spring of 2024 in New York.

These steps will hopefully lead to an emerging consensus among Member States, or at least a progressively overlapping majority of views by States, on the options contained in the OHCHR Working Paper. The discussions both in Geneva and in New York will facilitate the development of the next biennial General Assembly resolution on the human rights treaty body system in December 2024, which should include a budget to implement the conclusions.

Unfortunately, despite our continued efforts through the treaty body strengthening process, advocating with Member States to ensure an effective functioning of the treaty body system, an imbalance persists between existing resources and the needs of treaty bodies' work. Not only is the work increasing in quantitative terms, but also in its substantive scope. The staffing shortage

significantly impacts on your work, but also has a detrimental effect on the work-life balance of each staff member in the Branch. We all know that colleagues regularly go beyond the call of duty, be it Programme Management staff, Human Rights Officers, Secretaries, or colleagues in management positions. As we are working on the same topics towards the same goal, although our respective roles and responsibilities are different, it is essential that we join hands in making the limitations of the system visible, particularly to Member States who created it to serve a purpose, that is effectively delivering in the interest of the people we serve.

Mme Chair, Distinguished Members,

This week you are meeting in parallel with the final week of the 54th session of the Human Rights Council, when action will be taken on the multitude of draft resolutions that have been tabled. Among them, the Committee may wish to be particularly attentive to the resolutions on the right to privacy in the digital age and on the death penalty, among others.

The Committee has an entire month of session ahead, in which it will review seven States party reports, a number of individual communications under the Optional Protocol, and follow-up reports to concluding observations and Views, in addition to the system-wide issues arising from the meeting of Chairpersons.

I will therefore not keep you from your work any further. I will conclude by conveying my very best wishes to all of you for a successful and productive session. Thank you for your attention.