

Check against delivery

Remote 71st session of the  
Committee against Torture



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Mr. Chairperson,  
Distinguished members of the Committee,  
Excellencies,  
Ladies and Gentlemen,

On behalf of the Secretary-General of the United Nations, I would like to welcome you to the seventy-first session of the Committee against Torture.

At the outset, let me congratulate and welcome Mr. Peter Vedel Kessing as a new member of the Committee against Torture. We look forward to working with you and meeting you in person in Geneva in the future.

As you know, in different parts of the world, the COVID-19 pandemic and its variants are still present and we all continue facing the consequences of this major crisis. The work of all ten human rights treaty bodies have also been impacted. At the same time, human rights violations have continued, and in some instances increased, affecting often in particular victims of torture and human rights defenders.

In these circumstances, strong and united messages by human rights mechanisms are critical. A case in point was the joint statement that the four UN Anti-Torture mechanisms, including your Committee, issued on the International Day in Support of Victims of Torture on 26 June. The mechanisms called on States to respect and uphold the right to redress in all its aspects and dimensions, in particular by ensuring that civil society organizations and human rights defenders can carry out their vital work in documenting torture and supporting the rehabilitation of victims, unfettered of restrictions and reprisals. This theme was also highlighted by your Chair and other UN anti-torture mechanisms at the webinar entitled “Fostering Civic Space to Obtain Redress and Accountability for Victims of Torture”

organized to mark the International Day in Support of Victims of Torture and the 40th Anniversary of the UN Voluntary Fund for Victims of Torture.

Your participation in the Treaty Bodies Working Group on the Covid 19 through your focal point Mr. Erdogan Iscan has also contributed to the permanent functioning of the whole treaty body system in the past months. The working group has helped to address technical and other challenges. It has also facilitated enhanced interaction on substantive human rights consequence of the pandemic, including through regional webinars organized by the Human Rights Treaties Branch (Capacity Building Programme) in cooperation with our Regional Offices and Human Rights Treaty Bodies, focusing inter alia on the impact of COVID-19 on mental health and the role of human rights mechanisms and standards in this respect.

Despite your dedication to ensure business continuity and avoid a protection gap and the continuous support to the Secretariat, it is clear that Covid-19 has hampered your capacity to fully discharge your important mandate. While on-line sessions such as the one you are starting today have played an important role in ensuring the continuation of your work in these exceptional circumstances, they entail a range of limitations and challenges on several fronts, including technical and operational ones, such as time difference constraints, limited availability and accessibility of platforms with interpretation as well as internet connectivity issues. You have also been working without compensation or honorarium for time you spent on-line to discharge your important tasks. Given these circumstances, your commitment to pursue your work remotely in these exceptional circumstances in the interest of rights holders despite obstacles and to pilot an on-line focused review at the present session is to be commended.

With this in mind and in light of the fact that the COVID-19 situation has improved in Geneva and in many other locations -- although the appearance of several variants raises new concerns -- we are working towards resuming in-person Treaty Body sessions as of September. As you

may know, the Swiss Authorities have lifted many travel restrictions, with the possibility of global travel if travellers are vaccinated with recognized vaccines. Additionally, the temporary freeze of the Organization's regular budget has been recently lifted, allowing for the travel of experts to resume. In close cooperation with OHCHR's COVID crisis team, the Programme Support and Management Services and UNOG, we have started preparations for the return to in-person meetings, and a detailed information note thereon will be shared with you shortly. Amongst the outstanding issues, there is the limited availability of rooms with technology to allow for remote participation of stakeholders in the Palais des Nations, which is significantly impacted by Strategic Heritage Plan renovations, and in Palais Wilson. We will keep you informed in order to facilitate your own travel planning in full compliance with the evolving sanitary and travel conditions.

Distinguished members of the Committee,

You have a busy agenda with adoption of views, the focused country dialogue on Belgium and related consultations with civil society and National Human Rights Institutions, follow-up activities, work on reprisals and under article 20 of the Convention, working methods as well as meetings with the Convention against Torture Initiative (CTI) and the treaty body capacity-building programme colleagues. You are conducting all this work in the on-line format that is challenging for Members and the secretariat alike. We are indeed all looking forward to returning to in-person meetings as soon as conditions allow, and OHCHR together with other relevant UN entities involved are working towards this goal in close consultation with all treaty bodies.

Let me wish you a very successful meeting.

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