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Committee against Torture

65th Session



Opening address by
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Human Rights Treaties Branch
Representative of the Secretary General

Geneva, 12 November 2018

Chairperson,

Distinguished members of the Committee,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

On behalf of the Secretary-General, I declare open and welcome you to the **sixty-fifth session** of the Committee against Torture. In doing so, I convey the greetings of **the new High Commissioner for Human Rights, Ms. Michelle Bachelet**, who succeeded Mr. Zeid Ra'ad Al-Husseini on 1 September 2018.

In her statement to **the First Ministerial Meeting of the Alliance for Torture-Free Trade** held on 24 September 2018 in New York, the High Commissioner referred to the fact that her country and her family had suffered from the devastating effects of torture. She reminded States that they do not only have a legal obligation to prohibit and refrain from torture but that under the Convention against Torture they must also take effective steps to prevent it. The High Commissioner also stated no State and no company should export torture; no State should permit the sale of equipment whose use would be illegal in their own country and no State should turn a blind eye to the final use of products made on its territory.

Also in her first address to **the 39th session of the Human Rights Council** on 10 September 2018 in Geneva, the High Commissioner drew on her personal experience as a political detainee as well as a physician, including for children who had experienced torture and the enforced disappearance of their parents. With such personal and professional exposure to the effects of torture, the High Commissioner fully appreciates the importance of

the crucial work carried out by United Nations anti-torture mechanisms, namely the Subcommittee on Prevention of Torture, the Special Rapporteur on Torture, the Voluntary Fund for the Victims of Torture and your Committee. More broadly, when addressing the Human Rights Council, the High Commissioner directly referred to the core human rights treaties, and the recommendations of all United Nations human rights bodies and experts as fundamental contributions to the work of preventing, mitigating and ending human rights violations. She also praised the fact that the recommendations of the Treaty Bodies, and the Council's Special Procedures and Universal Periodic Review, are increasingly integrated into coordinated tools, to enable better adoption by States, UN Country Teams and other actors.

Since taking up her office, the High Commissioner has stressed her fundamental attachment to the courage, the dignity and selflessness of all defenders and activists for human rights. The crucial role played by human rights defenders is also highlighted in the recent report of the Secretary-General on cooperation with the United Nations, its representatives and mechanisms in the field of human rights (A/HRC/39/41), containing detailed information on intimidation and reprisals faced by those cooperating with the United Nations in the field of human rights. On 19 September 2018, the Assistant Secretary-General for Human Rights, as the senior official leading the efforts of the United Nations in this area, held the first-ever interactive dialogue on the report at the Human Rights Council. He stressed that, while cases of reprisals against human rights defenders presented in the report were only the tip of the iceberg, the report demonstrated that the magnitude and scope of reprisals. Three particularly disturbing trends were emphasized: reprisals being invoked in the context of counter-terrorism, with human rights defenders being labelled as “terrorists”; reprisals often

disguised in legal, political and administrative obstacles; and finally the use of accreditation and security procedures to hinder people from speaking out at United Nations headquarters and elsewhere. The Assistant Secretary-General for Human Rights explained his intention to do more to engage with United Nations partners who are witnesses of reprisals and to explore how to address the issue of reprisals more effectively as a system. Your contribution will be essential, since the Committee against Torture has played a leading role in this area within the treaty body system. You have had a focal point on reprisals since 2012, you maintain an informative website on cases of reprisals and you have adopted guidelines on the receipt and handling of allegations of reprisals against individuals and organizations cooperating with the Committee, including a clear recognition of the value of the San José Guidelines against Intimidation or Reprisals. I am convinced that your in-depth experience and expertise will contribute to a common approach on combatting reprisals throughout the United Nations system. In that context, your participation in the workshop on reprisals co-organized by OHCHR and the International Service for Human Rights on 12 and 13 December 2018 in Geneva is highly appreciated. We hope that the workshop will help treaty bodies to share and replicate good practices concerning the role of focal points on reprisals, in line with the recommendation made by the Treaty Body Chairpersons at their thirtieth annual meeting of in New York from 28th May to 1st June 2018,

Chairperson, Committee Members,

The Secretary-General's report on the status of the treaty body system, together with the 24 statistical annexes, is now available on the website of the Office and in your

reference folder. The report highlights that the adjustments to the meeting time allocated to Committees has not been matched by the allocation of sufficient staff resources corresponding to the workload of treaty bodies. The gap between growing workload and staff resources is particularly wide in respect of individual communications. The report also stresses that other mandated activities of treaty bodies are far more labor intensive than what was originally anticipated. Therefore, the staff of the Office have difficulty to keep up with the workload and complete the required tasks. I would like to acknowledge the efforts made by this Committee, especially your Chair in the context of the 73rd session of the United Nations General Assembly, in appealing to States to provide increased human resources to support your work, in particular with regard to work on individual communications.

We look forward to addressing these immediate challenges with all of you, and also to exploring sustainable, longer term options, including in connection with 2020 review and beyond. In this respect, we welcome your Committee's active engagement and extensive discussions to formulate your contribution to the 2020 as a follow-up to the last meeting of the Chairs of treaty bodies.

As you know, the Chairs also agreed to explore further alignment of the simplified reporting procedure across treaty bodies. In order to facilitate this process, our Office along with the Geneva Academy is organizing a workshop on this topic on 10 and 11 December 2018 in Geneva. The unique experience of your Committee, which pioneered the simplified reporting procedure, will be of great value to these discussions and will help us to move this work forward. The Chairs also endorsed elements for a common aligned procedure for follow-

up to Concluding Observations, decisions and views. We look forward to your contribution in that regard.

Finally, I would like to inform you about recent organizational steps we have taken to advance coordinated and focused anti-torture work within the Human Rights Treaties Branch. We have brought together the Secretariats of the Committee against Torture, the Subcommittee on the Prevention of Torture and the UN Voluntary Fund for the Victims of Torture in a new “Anti-Torture, Coordination and Fund Section”, which also deals with treaty body strengthening and supports chairpersons meetings. The change will not affect the composition of the CAT Secretariat, which will continue to be headed by Patrice Gillibert. I am confident that this clustering of anti-torture teams will help to raise the profile of our work in this area, facilitate your important ongoing cooperation with SPT and the Fund, and encourage further synergies between the respective secretariats.

Let me conclude by wishing you a fruitful and successful session for a full realization of the Convention against Torture.

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