

**UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Volker Türk**

**Remarks to the Opening of the High-level segment**

**61<sup>st</sup> session of the Human Rights Council**

**23 February 2026**

Mr. President of the Human Rights Council,

Mr. Secretary-General,

Excellencies,

A fierce competition for power, control and resources is playing out on the world stage at a rate and intensity unseen for the past 80 years.

People are feeling unmoored, anxious and insecure.

The gears of global power are shifting; the consequences are not clear.

Some are signalling the end of the world order as we know it.

But today, I want to talk about another world order.

One that is organised from the ground up, and that is unshakeable.

A foundational system of how people relate to each other, based on our inherent worth, our hopes, and our common values.

I am referring to people's pursuit of dignity, equality, and justice.

This quest is innate to what makes us human: to be free, to be heard, and to have our basic needs met.

And it is a strong counterbalance to the top-down, autocratic trends we see today.

The use of force to resolve disputes between and within countries is becoming normalized.

Inflammatory threats against sovereign nations are thrown about, with no regard to the fire they could ignite.

The laws of war are being brutally violated.

Mass civilian suffering – from Sudan, to Gaza, to Ukraine, to Myanmar – is unfolding before our eyes.

In Sudan, there needs to be accountability for all violations by all parties – notably, the war crimes and possible crimes against humanity committed by the Rapid Support Forces in El Fasher. Such atrocities must not be repeated in Kordofan or elsewhere. All those with influence need to act urgently to put an end to this senseless war.

The situation in Gaza remains catastrophic. Palestinians are still dying from Israeli fire, cold, hunger, and treatable diseases. The aid allowed in is not enough to meet the massive needs. There are concerns over ethnic cleansing in both Gaza and the West Bank, where Israel is accelerating efforts to consolidate unlawful annexation. Any sustainable solution must be based on two states living side by side in equal dignity and rights, in line with UN resolutions and international law.

Tomorrow marks four years since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Four interminable and agonizing years. Civilian casualties have soared, and Russia's systematic attacks on Ukraine's energy and water infrastructure could amount to international crimes. The fighting needs to end, and I urge a focus on human rights and justice in any ceasefire or peace agreement.

In Myanmar, five years after the military coup, the awful conflict is claiming even more civilian lives, and the humanitarian situation continues to deteriorate. The recent elections staged by the military have only deepened people's despair.

Across most violent conflicts today, journalists, health and aid workers are targeted, in blatant violation of international law.

These actions must not be allowed to harden into the new normal.

States need to be persistent objectors to violations of the law – by pursuing accountability, and by clearly denouncing these egregious crimes with consistency, and without exception.

Meanwhile, violence and tensions are resurging in some countries, including South Sudan and Ethiopia.

And authorities in Iran have violently repressed mass protests with lethal force, killing thousands.

I will provide more detail on these and other country situations in my global update later this week.

Excellencies,

Developments around the world point to a deeply worrying trend: domination and supremacy are making a comeback.

If we listen to the rhetoric of some leaders, what lurks behind it is a belief that they are above the law, and above the UN Charter.

They claim exceptional status, exceptional danger or exceptional moral judgement to pursue their own agenda at any cost. And why wouldn't they try, when they are unlikely to face consequences?

They build and sustain systems that perpetuate inequalities within and between countries. Some weaponise their economic leverage.

They spread disinformation to distract, silence and marginalize.

A tight clique of tech tycoons controls an outsize proportion of global information flows, distorting public debate, markets, and even governance systems.

Corporate and state interests ravage our environment, robbing the riches of the earth for their own gain.

But at the same time, people are not watching all this from the sidelines.

They are activating their power, from the ground up.

Women and young people especially are leading these movements.

They are claiming their right to basic living conditions, to fair pay, to bodily autonomy, to self-determination, to be heard, to vote freely, and many other rights.

From Nepal to Madagascar, from Serbia to Peru and beyond, people are demanding equality and denouncing corruption.

Neighbours and communities are standing up for each other – sometimes even risking their lives.

People are protesting war and injustice in places far from home, expressing solidarity and pressuring their governments to act.

They see human rights as a practical force for good – and they are right.

Human rights are anathema to supremacy: they are a direct challenge to those who seek and cling to power. That is what makes human rights radical, and that is what gives them force.

They are universal, timeless, and indestructible.

Excellences,

Les droits humains ne sont pas apparus comme par magie avec la Déclaration universelle du 10 décembre 1948.

Les peuples aspiraient à la liberté et à l'égalité bien avant que ces principes ne soient codifiés dans des accords nationaux ou internationaux.

À la fin du 19<sup>e</sup> siècle, les esclaves de l'actuel Haïti se sont soulevés contre la domination coloniale, au nom de l'égalité raciale.

Les révolutions américaine et française ont remis en cause l'autorité incontrôlée.

Le mouvement abolitionniste était un rejet de la traite transatlantique des esclaves – le système d'asservissement le plus brutal qui soit.

Au début des années 1900, les femmes se sont unies pour revendiquer le droit de vote. La lutte pour l'égalité des genres se poursuit.

Après les deux guerres mondiales sanglantes et la Shoah, la Charte des Nations unies a réaffirmé la foi dans les droits humains fondamentaux, ainsi que dans la dignité et la valeur de l'être-humain.

Le 20e siècle a ensuite été marqué par une période de décolonisation, qui a réaffirmé le droit à l'autodétermination.

Les peuples se sont mobilisés pour mettre fin à la ségrégation raciale, pour réclamer les droits des travailleurs et des travailleuses, et pour protéger les droits des personnes LGBT.

Des mères ont défilé ensemble pour réclamer justice pour leurs enfants disparus, de l'Argentine au Sri Lanka, à la Syrie.

Et les jeunes ont fait entendre leur voix pour la justice climatique.

Excellencies,

Human rights are the thread that runs through all these movements.

And we do not take their achievements for granted.

Tyranny will seize any chance and exploit any opening. We must keep standing up for human rights, in solidarity with each other.

When we come together, we wield more power than any autocrat or tech billionaire. The struggle for human rights can never be derailed by the whims of a handful of leaders with reactionary, supremacist agendas.

While some States are weakening the multilateral system, we need bolder and more joined-up responses.

First, this means calling out violations of international law, regardless of the perpetrators.

Too often, denouncing violations by one party is labelled as siding with the enemy. In reality, it is upholding universality, and the pursuit of justice for all.

The alternative – selective, fragmented responses – weakens international law and hurts us all.

The entire human rights ecosystem is designed to promote universality and ensure consistency. This includes the tools mandated by this Council. I condemn all attacks against them.

Second, we need stronger commitment to accountability. This includes strengthening the International Criminal Court and encouraging national prosecutions under the principle of universal jurisdiction.

We need to increase the cost of breaking international law.

Third, let's forge coalitions to champion what unites us, and uphold equality, dignity, and justice for all.

We must protect the diversity of the human family and demonstrate what we gain by standing together.

In the coming weeks, we will set in motion a Global Alliance for Human Rights to capture the energy and commitment that is palpable everywhere.

This will be a cross-regional, multi-stakeholder coalition of States, businesses, cities, philanthropists, scientists, artists, philosophers, young people and civil society.

It will confront top-down domination with grassroots solidarity and support.

It will represent the quiet majority, who want a different world.

Human rights are not political currency, and they are not up for grabs.

Our future depends on our joint commitment to defend every person's rights, every time, everywhere.