

**THE SECRETARY-GENERAL**

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**REMARKS TO THE HUMAN RIGHTS COUNCIL**

**Geneva, 23 February 2026**

[as delivered]

Distinguished President of the Human Rights Council,

High Commissioner,

Excellencies,

Ladies and gentlemen,

Human rights are under a full-scale attack around the world.

The rule of law is being outmuscled by the rule of force.

And this assault is not coming from the shadows. Or by surprise. It is happening in plain sight – and often led by those who hold the greatest power.

Around the world, human rights are being pushed back deliberately, strategically, and sometimes proudly.

The consequences are devastating – as witnessed in the Council.

And as written in the lives of people who suffer twice: first from violence, oppression, or exclusion – and then again from the world's indifference.

When human rights fall, everything else tumbles.

Peace. Development. Social cohesion. Trust. Solidarity.

This is precisely why the tools of the Human Rights Council – such as the Special Rapporteurs, Special Procedures, investigative mechanisms, and the Universal Periodic Review – are essential.

And it is precisely why – as we mark the Council's 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary – we also recognize it is more important than ever to translate geopolitical engagement into a path towards strengthening human rights everywhere.

Excellencies,

Tomorrow, I should address the Security Council on the fourth anniversary of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, where more than 15,000 civilians have been killed.

It is more than past time to end the bloodshed.

I began this month speaking to the Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People about blatant violations of human rights, human dignity, and international law in the Occupied Palestinian Territory.

The current trajectory is stark, clear and purposeful: the two-State solution is being stripped away in broad daylight.

The international community cannot allow this to happen.

And a few days ago, I was at the African Union Summit where Sudan, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the Sahel and other crises were front and centre.

Excellencies,

We are living in a world where mass suffering is excused away ... where humans are used as bargaining chips ... where international law is treated as a mere inconvenience.

Conflicts are multiplying and impunity has become a contagion.

That is not due to a lack of knowledge, tools or institutions.

It is the result of political choices.

This crisis of respect for human rights does not stand alone.

It mirrors and magnifies every other global fracture.

Humanitarian needs are exploding while funding collapses.

Inequalities are widening at staggering speed.

Countries are drowning in debt and despair.

Climate chaos is accelerating.

And technology – especially artificial intelligence – is increasingly being used in ways that suppress rights, deepen inequality, and expose marginalized people to new forms of discrimination both online and offline.

Across every front, those who are already vulnerable are being pushed further to the margins.

And human rights defenders are among the first to be silenced when they try to warn us.

In this coordinated offensive, human rights are the first casualty.

We see it in a tightening grip on civic space.

Journalists and activists jailed. NGOs shut down.

Women's rights rolled back.

Children's rights ignored.

Persons with disabilities excluded.

Democracies eroding.

The right of peaceful assembly crushed – and I condemn once again the recent violent repression of protests in Iran.

Migrants harassed, arrested and expelled with total disregard for their human rights and their humanity.

Refugees scapegoated.

LGBTIQ+ communities vilified.

Minorities and indigenous peoples targeted.

Religious communities attacked.

Online spaces poisoned by disinformation and hate – resulting in real-world harm.

Excellencies,

Human rights are not a slogan for good times. They are a duty at all times.

And so we must stand up for them – and even when it is difficult, inconvenient, or costly.

Especially then.

That requires action on three urgent fronts.

First, we must defend our shared foundations – without compromise.

The UN Charter, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and the instruments of international human rights law are not a menu.

Leaders cannot pick the parts they like and ignore the rest.

And human rights themselves are also not divisible.

Economic rights, social rights, cultural rights, civil rights and political rights – these are inherent, universal, inalienable, and interdependent.

Excellences,

Deuxièmement, nous devons renforcer nos propres institutions.

Nous ne pouvons pas faire comme si les dysfonctionnements de la gouvernance mondiale actuelle n'avaient aucun rapport avec la détérioration mondiale des droits humains.

Notre volonté de réformer et de renforcer le Conseil de sécurité et l'architecture financière mondiale n'est pas une simple affaire d'intendance institutionnelle.

Il s'agit d'une condition essentielle pour assurer la protection des droits humains et des libertés fondamentales.

Quand le Conseil de sécurité est paralysé, quand les vétos servent de paravent politique, quand les rivalités géopolitiques l'emportent sur la protection des civils, le résultat est le même :

L'impunité s'étend. Les souffrances se multiplient. Et les droits humains sont piétinés.

Nous avons besoin d'un Conseil de sécurité qui reflète le monde d'aujourd'hui – pas celui de 1945.

Il en va de même pour l'architecture financière internationale, afin de garantir aux pays en développement une participation réelle et une voix qui compte.

Quand les pays les plus petits et les plus vulnérables sont pris au piège de la dette et privés d'investissements suffisants, leurs populations sont privées de leurs droits humains – y compris l'éducation, les soins de santé, la sécurité et la dignité.

Notre Initiative ONU80 renforce également le lien entre droits humains, paix, développement durable et protection en contexte humanitaire – afin que ces domaines agissent de manière plus cohérente et se renforcent mutuellement.

Elle propose également de créer un Groupe des droits humains à l'échelle du système des Nations Unies, afin d'ancrer plus profondément les droits humains dans l'ensemble des politiques et des activités de l'Organisation.

Et je remercie le Haut-Commissaire d'avoir mené cet effort, qui s'appuie sur l'Appel à l'action en faveur des droits humains.

Excellencies,

Third, we must unlock the power of human rights.

After all, human rights are not only what we defend – they are what lifts the world to a better place.

When rights are upheld, people live more freely.

Economies grow more fairly.

Communities trust more deeply.

And peace and stability take hold because dignity takes root.

Human rights are not an obstacle to progress – they are essential to progress.

We have seen it time and again, all over the world.

Where rights advance, conflict loses ground.

Where justice strengthens, violent extremism weakens.

Where equality expands, possibility explodes.

Where freedom prevails, societies flourish.

And so we must change course and let human dignity set the direction.

By renewing our commitment to – and respect for – the rule of law at every level.

By supporting the pivotal work of the International Court of Justice and the International Criminal Court.

By delivering on the Sustainable Development Goals.

By accelerating climate action.

By upholding what makes us human.

Excellencies,

Ladies and gentlemen,

In my first address to this Council as Secretary-General, I spoke of a deep personal commitment to human rights.

Growing up under the Salazar dictatorship taught me that the denial of human rights corrodes every aspect of society.

Working for the United Nations has shown me how respect for human rights brings out the best in humanity.

And now, in my tenth year at the helm of the UN, the power of human rights has never been more clear.

Human rights are not West or East, North or South.

They are not a luxury – they are not negotiable.

They are the foundation of a more peaceful and secure world.

And States are bound by their obligations under the Charter and international law.

We still have much work ahead together.

But since this is my final address to the Opening of your session, I leave you with this appeal:

Do not let the erosion of human rights become the accepted price of political expediency or geopolitical competition.

Do not let power write a new rulebook in which the vulnerable have no rights and the powerful have no limits.

Let this Human Rights Council be the voice and shield for all those in need.

Let this be the place that helps end the broad and brutal assault on human rights.

Because a world that protects human rights protects itself.

And I thank you.