

Remarks by H.E. Annalena Baerbock

President of the 80th Session of the United Nations General Assembly

Opening of the 61st Session of the Human Rights Council

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[as delivered]

Distinguished President of the Human Rights Council,

Mr. Secretary General,

Mr. High Commissioner for Human Rights,

Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen,

As you have heard already the importance of human rights and as we all agree, at least in principle otherwise we would not speak at the Human Rights Council about the importance in the 20th year of this Human Rights Council to protect human rights, I would like to start a bit differently, a bit self-reflectively to our own work here, especially given the latest headlines of the worst structural human rights violation, some call it gender apartheid system, against Afghan women and girls.

Because frankly speaking I cannot stop thinking about the debates we had also here in our UN system, also here in Geneva, in New York, in different capitals about how we should deal with humanitarian aid delivery and the principles of humanitarian aid and support while women were not allowed to work anymore, also not for the UN anymore, and girls could not go to school anymore.

I think you also remember very well, because these are hard debates and hard decisions, that there was also the argument that this is Kandahar Kabul might be different, there might be more moderates which could prevail and in some speaking points of capitals and maybe also of UN officials, the former most important point of protecting human rights and women's rights was in some of these debates a bit lowered.

Therefore, I think this is also a moment where we should remember once and for all and again that appeasement in the light of the most severe human rights violations never prevails, and that we should not learn the hard lesson again that women's rights are indeed the benchmark for the state of a society, the state of the world, because if women, meaning half of the world population of 4 billion people, are not safe, no one will be safe.

So as we are seeing not only a dramatic backlash in women's, but also human rights and other rules and standards which were believed to be set in stone and are now openly questioned, dismissed, or violated, my speech today, similar to the SG's speech, is a call to action to all of us, to all of you because history teaches us that large systems rarely collapse in one dramatic moment. They erode slowly, rule by rule, commitment by commitment with those who should defend them staying silent, until one day what seemed permanent simply vanishes.

So being a member of this Human Rights Council, a Member State, an ambassador, a minister, a UN official in these times is not a spectator sport.

We are not bystanders who have the luxury of standing on the sidelines while injustice unfolds. Silence is a choice. Inaction is a choice and it has consequences. Yet, the good news is that action is a choice as well and it lies in our own hands.

And the human rights system, the Universal Declaration, the principles as enshrined in the Charter need this action of every one of us now - action by governments and diplomats, officials and parliamentarians, it needs all of us.

It needs you – your support, your leadership, your principled stands, your cross-regional cooperation - to protect, defend and champion all three principles of the Charter: peace and security, development and human rights. As we all know they are interconnected, that they benefit us all individually and collectively.

It needs you as ambassadors to stand up when the next attack on human rights comes by single amendments to resolutions which we thought were written in stone and suddenly

deleting some humans – women, or LGBTIQ+ persons, people with disabilities, refugees, migrants. You don't know who will be next.

As the Pact for the Future states, these three pillars are “equally important, interlinked and mutually reinforcing. We cannot have one without the others.”

It means always endeavoring to bridge divides and find compromise, insofar as compromise doesn't become appeasement. When compromise shifts from mutual accommodation to the slow erosion, or deliberate dismantling of the very foundations of this institution, then it is no longer compromise, it is compromising.

Therefore it needs you, distinguished ministers, as well to uphold human rights not only here in the Council when we are meeting together, but in your national debates when in highly populist times with social media pressure in seconds some suddenly challenge the 1951 Refugee Convention again, or start lowering the age of marriage meaning de facto allowing child marriage, or when we have the spread of antisemitic, racist or Islamophobic propaganda trying to rewrite our criminal law, our civil law.

It needs the clear commitment from every Member State that UN premises belong to the United Nations, including UNWRA, and that their schools are essential for guaranteeing Palestinian children their right to education.

It needs a clear commitment from every Member State that the abduction of Ukrainian children is a war crime. It needs the clear commitment of every Member State that everywhere around the world people have the right to demonstrate peacefully and freely, also in Iran.

It needs all of us to neither give in nor give up if we are seeing humanitarian catastrophes, starvation, mass killings and mass rape in Sudan year after year, seeing the devastating situation of the Rohingya yet continuing to try even harder for the delivery of humanitarian assistance, for people to return, for people to be safe.

It needs our common understanding that our human rights work is not static yet must evolve as new threats to human dignity emerge.

This includes the rapidly evolving fields of technology and artificial intelligence. Used responsibly it can expand knowledge, improve healthcare, strengthen disaster response, and support climate-resilient agriculture. But without safeguards, these same technologies risk entrenching bias and amplifying harm even teaching our children how to commit suicide, currently in some countries without any consequences.

Responsible global governance of technology is therefore essential, and the AI Summit as well as the UN's new Independent International Scientific Panel on AI, approved by the General Assembly just eleven days ago, are great proof that even and especially in these challenging times we are indeed better together if we take a step forward.

In this regard I would really like to thank the Secretary-General because he was the one pushing forward the artificial intelligence framework, the debate that this is also the responsibility of our United Nations because it is not true that we have to lower our ambitions for caring around the world. The United Nations means facing new chances but also new challenges.

And for sure in these times when our system is heavily under pressure, and 80 years is quite some time, we have to reform. It needs you all of you, all of us, in Geneva as well as us in NY and other places around the world together to engage jointly in our UN 80 reform process. And we have to be true to ourselves, there is an overlap between the Human Rights Council and the Third Committee, there are duplications across agencies, and this is the reason we are doing this reform - to make this institution stronger, better, and more efficient and not weakening it.

Finally, for an institution built on human rights representing all of the people, one question looms large: how is it that in 80 years a woman has never served as Secretary-General even though half of the 8 billion people we are supposed to serve are women and girls.

So again, silence is a choice but action is as well.

After Member States called in consensus to strongly encourage the nomination of women do not suddenly, as the decision about it comes closer, let them ask you to explain again to explain why it should be a woman and question their competence, a question we never hear when we talk about male applicants. On the contrary, make them explain why not after 80 years half of society, half of the world also has the right to be represented.

Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen, leadership matters.

Just around the corner in Italy the Olympics are just closing and the Paralympics are starting. Athletes from around the world in all their diversity showed us again what we can achieve when we come together, despite our differences or especially because of our diversity, to compete fiercely yet fairly, on the same playing field, governed by the same rules, always in mutual respect, that a life is a life, that a human being is a human being.

Now it is up to us, to you, to all of us to stand up in this spirit. It needs your support, your leadership, your principled stand, your cross-regional cooperation to defend these principles, our common, global human rights here in Geneva, in New York, in your capital and your government, now and every day.

I thank you.