

**Tánaiste's address to the Fortieth Session of the Human Rights Council
Geneva, 25 February 2019**

Mr President

Mr Secretary General

Madame High Commissioner

Madame President

Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen

It is a privilege to address the Human Rights Council in Geneva. Ireland is a strong and determined supporter of the Council. Its work and mechanisms, and the work of the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, were never more needed than they are today.

I pay particular tribute to you, Madame High Commissioner, and to the Office you lead, for consistently providing an independent voice for human rights. Your measured and balanced voice for the voiceless and the vulnerable ensures their reality and suffering cannot be ignored.

Representing the Government of Ireland, I am proud that human rights are at the core of Ireland's foreign policy. Exactly 100 years ago, the first act of the new Irish Parliament of an independent Republic, was to issue a "Message to the Free Nations of the World". It anchored our approach to international engagement "*in freedom and justice*".

A century on, we stand by that commitment to freedom and justice. It is woven through our foreign policy: through our bilateral engagement and through our determined and committed membership of the European Union.

It underpins our commitment to the United Nations, and to the Sustainable Development Goals. It is the reason we are acting on our promise to meet the UN target of providing 0.7% of GNP in development assistance by 2030. And it is the cornerstone of our candidacy for a seat on the UN Security Council for 2021-22.

In Ireland, we understand that international efforts to create a peaceful, fair, and just world can only succeed if they are based on respect for the human rights of all. As a global,

interdependent community, we have recognised that the development – indeed the survival – of our planet requires us to “leave no one behind”. A forward-leaning position on human rights is therefore a pre-requisite.

And yet, as our hard-won multilateralism comes under question from many directions, we can often feel far removed from delivering on this ambitious agenda.

The values expressed in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights are today being challenged and undermined.

In 2019, across the world, we are witnessing serious and unacceptable threats to individual human rights:

- The essential voice of civil society is under pressure in every geographic region, including my own;
- Human rights defenders are suffering unprecedented levels of attack;
- Acts of intimidation and reprisal against those seeking to engage with the UN are rising at an alarming rate;
- Climate change continues to threaten vulnerable people;
- Refugees and migrants suffer human rights abuse fleeing conflict;
- and
- the use of the death penalty remains of great concern.

We share the concerns expressed by the High Commissioner yesterday on the dangerous situation in Venezuela. It is essential that all sides show restraint and end violence.

The only possible solution in the interests of the Venezuelan people will be through the exercise of democracy and a respect for peoples’ human rights.

We continue to be deeply troubled by the calamitous humanitarian crisis and human rights violations in Yemen. We fully support the work of the UN Special Envoy and we call on all parties to the conflict to engage with the UN-led process seeking to bring an end to the suffering of the Yemeni people by sustaining a ceasefire to allow safe access to support and deliver humanitarian assistance.

The situation in the Occupied Palestinian Territory remains of great concern to the Government and the people of Ireland. Having experienced the profound and positive impact of a peace process on our island, Ireland's commitment to constructive engagement on the Middle East Peace Process is unwavering and is a priority.

We see progress on a Two-State Solution as the only meaningful way to achieve a sustainable peace, even as developments on the ground make its achievement more difficult. There are clear obligations now on Israeli and Palestinian political leaders. We remain concerned at political decisions despite international obligations over the past twelve months that are further undermining efforts towards a peaceful solution – in particular relating to the expansion of illegal settlements and a disproportionate response to protests in Gaza.

Faced with so many seemingly intractable and hopeless challenges across the world, how do we, as Governments, respond?

We in Ireland believe the solution must involve improved cooperation across the UN system, particularly in this Human Rights Council. The United Nations and the Council itself are clearly not perfect or beyond criticism. They are institutions created and run by human beings, and the power is in our hands to enhance and improve them. For this reason, Ireland strongly supports the Secretary-General's reform agenda, as well as efforts to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of the Human Rights Council.

We maintain that the UN offers the best - indeed the only credible platform to bring us together as a global community to address conflict, instability, underdevelopment and humanitarian crises. We will therefore continue to use our voice and influence here in Geneva to raise human rights issues of concern, and – most importantly – to work with others to shape a collective response.

For instance, Ireland has been proud to work with partners to renew the mandate of the Group of Eminent and Regional Experts examining human rights violations and abuses in Yemen; we look forward to the Group's report to the Council in September. We have worked hard to support the EU and OIC-led efforts in response to the plight of the Rohingya in Myanmar. The cross-regional support for this initiative shows the UN at its best.

Ireland has also collaborated closely with others to champion the cause of civil society, including human rights defenders. We have continued to push for equality of treatment for LGBTI persons, and for other fundamental rights such as freedom of religion and belief, and freedom of association and assembly. And we have condemned without qualification, acts of intimidation or reprisal against those seeking to engage with the UN and its mechanisms.

These efforts will continue in the year ahead when we will exercise our prerogative at key moments in Council Sessions and during Universal Periodic Reviews to highlight priority issues of concern.

Mr President,

Some six months ago the UN family mourned the loss of the great Kofi Annan. I am reminded of him now. *To live - he said - is to choose. But to choose well, you must know who you are and what you stand for, where you want to go and why you want to get there.*

From an Irish perspective, in facing today's challenges we choose to step up our responsibilities on the international stage.

We choose to bring an ambitious and courageous vision to our campaign for a seat on the Security Council.

And here, we choose to work with partners inside this chamber and outside of it, to champion individual human rights and to place their vindication at the heart of what we do.

Thank you

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