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Darker and more dangerous: High Commissioner updates the Human Rights Council on human rights issues in 40 countries

Human Rights Council 36th session

Opening Statement by Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein, United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights

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Distinguished President of the Council,
Excellencies,
Colleagues, Friends,

As I enter the final year of my current mandate – a year which I will discharge with vigour and determination – I wish to begin with a few short reflections drawn from the past three years.

First, however, I want to recall all those who were murdered in New York, Washington DC and Pennsylvania on 11 September 2001. Like many who were living in New York, I will forever remember that huge gaping hole in the side of the building, the billowing smoke, the heroism of the fire-fighters and police, the collapsing towers, the murder of so many innocent people, the horror of it all. But also I remember the piercing clarity of the sky we all awoke to that day. So blue and clear, it nudged our spirits upward as we headed to work. And then the terrorists struck.

In the opening chapters of this century, perhaps the breathtaking acceleration of technological change is our blue sky. Today, perhaps all of us wonder whether a trigger pulled, a steering wheel turned, or a pin tugged by the fingers of some violent extremist will strike down our future prematurely. But the actions of violent extremists cannot totally obliterate our world. Only governments can do that – and this is the greater tragedy of today. Left on their current course, it will be governments who will break humanity. Terrorists may attack us, but the intellectual authors of those crimes will then often sit back and watch as governments peel away at human rights protections; watch, as our societies gradually unravel, with many setting course toward authoritarianism and oppression – staging for us, not a century of achievement and pride, but a century that is small, bitter and deprived, for the vast majority of humans.

The second of my reflections focuses on States' consistency – or lack of consistency – when it comes to human rights commitments: the so-called internal-external gap. Does it not disturb governments to defend the rights of humans elsewhere – in order to project themselves as global players – while at home they openly deny the rights of their own people? Do they not recognize the hypocrisy?

Third, does it not occur to the many Governments who engage in intimidation and bullying, and commit reprisals against human rights defenders and NGOs which work with the UN human rights mechanisms – do they not realise that this only confirms to us, and to the world, how much oppression and injustice they exercise in their own countries? This is not a shared future; it is the theft of their peoples' inalienable rights.

Fourth, does it not disturb governments when they seize only on some of the countries cited in my oral update and reports, ignoring others? Frequently, a particular critical emergency will demand the focused attention of this Council – and in those circumstances, when swift action is taken, the Council ought to be commended for it. But when this Council does not act with the urgency and magnitude commensurate to the crisis, selectivity becomes a poison that eats away at the credibility of this body.

Fifth, I encourage the President, and Member States, to develop a stronger, more unified voice in world affairs on behalf of human rights. I also suggest consideration be given to the need to exclude from this body States involved in the most egregious violations of human rights.

My final observation is this: many senior officials and diplomats indulge in attacks against the human rights mechanisms, or deny the existence of serious violations. It has been extraordinary in the past three years to see how some of these senior officials who once took a dim view of human rights will change their views fundamentally when they themselves are stripped of some of their own rights and freedoms. Violations of human rights should not have to become so personal, for all of us to truly grasp their importance.

Mr President,

In Myanmar, another brutal security operation is underway in Rakhine State – this time, apparently on a far greater scale. According to UNHCR, in less than three weeks over 270,000 people have fled to Bangladesh, three times more than the 87,000 who fled the previous operation. Many more people reportedly remain trapped between Myanmar and Bangladesh. The operation, which is ostensibly in reaction to attacks by militants on 25 August against 30 police posts, is clearly disproportionate and without regard for basic principles of international law. We have received multiple reports and satellite imagery of security forces and local militia burning Rohingya villages, and consistent accounts of extrajudicial killings, including shooting fleeing civilians.

I am further appalled by reports that the Myanmar authorities have now begun to lay landmines along the border with Bangladesh, and to learn of official statements that refugees who have fled the violence will only be allowed back if they can provide “proof of nationality”. Given that successive Myanmar governments have since 1962 progressively stripped the Rohingya population of their political and civil rights, including citizenship rights – as acknowledged by Aung San Suu Kyi's own appointed Rakhine Advisory Commission – this measure resembles a cynical ploy to forcibly transfer large numbers of people without possibility of return.

Last year I warned that the pattern of gross violations of the human rights of the Rohingya suggested a widespread or systematic attack against the community, possibly amounting to crimes against humanity, if so established by a court of law. Because Myanmar has refused access to human rights investigators the current situation cannot yet be fully assessed, but the situation seems a textbook example of ethnic cleansing.

The Myanmar Government should stop claiming that the Rohingyas are setting fire to their own homes and laying waste to their own villages. This complete denial of reality is doing great damage to the international standing of a Government which, until recently, benefited from immense good will. I call on the Government to end its current cruel military operation, with accountability for all violations that have occurred and to reverse the pattern of severe and widespread discrimination against the Rohingya population. I strongly urge the authorities to allow my Office unfettered access to the country.

In Bangladesh, I encourage the Government to maintain open borders for the Rohingya refugees, and I urge the international community's support in helping the authorities receive and better assist the refugee population. Turning to the domestic situation in Bangladesh, I appreciate the Government's constructive engagement with my Office, and I would like to continue to work with the authorities to address the range of very serious human rights issues in the country.

I deplore current measures in India to deport Rohingyas at a time of such violence against them in their country. Some 40,000 Rohingyas have settled in India, and 16,000 of them have received refugee documentation. The Minister of State for Home Affairs has reportedly said that because India is not a signatory to the Refugee Convention the country can dispense with international law on the matter, together with basic human compassion. However, by virtue of customary law, its ratification of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the obligations of due process and the universal principle of non-refoulement, India cannot carry out collective expulsions, or return people to a place where they risk torture or other serious violations.

I am also dismayed by a broader rise of intolerance towards religious and other minorities in India. The current wave of violent, and often lethal, mob attacks against people under the pretext of protecting the lives of cows is alarming. People who speak out for fundamental human rights are also threatened. Gauri Lankesh, a journalist who tirelessly addressed the corrosive effect of sectarianism and hatred, was assassinated last week. I have been heartened by the subsequent marches calling for protection of the right to freedom of expression, and by demonstrations in 12 cities to protest the lynchings.

Human rights defenders who work for the rights of India's most vulnerable groups – including those threatened with displacement by infrastructure projects such as the Sardar Sarovar Dam in the Narmada river valley – should be considered allies in building on India's achievements to create a stronger and more inclusive society. Instead, many are subject to harassment and even criminal proceedings, or denied protection by the State.

In Pakistan, the authorities often encourage intolerance for minorities or minority views, with sometimes deadly consequences. Many journalists and human rights defenders face daily threats of violence. Even allegations of blasphemy, or suggestions that blasphemy laws require revision to comply with the right to freedom of thought and religion can lead to vigilante violence. In addition, the Government has used vague and excessive legislation on the digital space, and regulations regarding NGO activities, to limit critical voices and shrink the democratic space. Violence against women remains extremely widespread, including forced marriage, acid attacks and forced and child marriage.

I regret the reluctance of both India and Pakistan to engage with my Office on the human rights concerns I have raised in recent months. This includes their failure to grant access to Kashmir on both sides of the Line of Control to verify the worrying developments that continue to be reported there. In the absence of such access, my Office is undertaking remote monitoring of the human rights situation in Kashmir on both sides of the Line of Control, with a view to making the findings public in the near future.

In Sri Lanka, I urge the Government to swiftly operationalize the Office of Missing Persons and to move faster on other essential confidence building measures, such as release of land occupied by the military, and resolving long-pending cases registered under the Prevention of Terrorism Act. I repeat my request for that Act to be replaced with a new law in line with international human rights standards. In the North, protests by victims indicate their growing frustration over the slow pace of reforms. I encourage the Government to act on its commitment in Resolution 30/1 to establish transitional justice mechanisms, and to establish a clear timeline and benchmarks for the implementation of these and other commitments.

This should not be viewed by the Government as a box-ticking exercise to placate the Council, but as an essential undertaking to address the rights of all its people. The absence of credible action in Sri Lanka to ensure accountability for alleged violations of international human rights law and international humanitarian law makes the exercise of universal jurisdiction even more necessary.

In the Philippines, I continue to be gravely concerned by the President's open support for a shoot-to-kill policy regarding suspects, as well as by the apparent absence of credible investigations into reports of thousands of extrajudicial killings, and the failure to prosecute any perpetrator. The recent killing of a schoolboy who was dragged into an alley and shot in the head by plain-clothed policeman on 16 August was described by the Minister of Justice as "an isolated case". However, suspicion of extrajudicial killings has now become so widespread that the initials EJK have reportedly become a verb in some communities – as in "he was EJKed". Two days after hundreds of people turned out for the teenager's funeral, the President again told police they would not be punished for killing suspects who resist arrest. This lack of respect for the due process rights of all Filipinos is appalling.

I am also shocked by President Duterte's threat to bomb schools for indigenous children in the southern Philippines, which he said were teaching children to rebel against the government. His order to police to shoot any human rights workers who "are part of" the drug trade or who "obstruct justice" is yet another blow to his country's reputation and his people's rights. I remain concerned about the case of Senator de Lima. Many human rights defenders who are the honour of their country face a growing number of death threats, and I call on the Government to ensure they are accorded full protection and the right to freedom of expression and peaceful assembly without reprisals. Measures taken towards a reintroduction of the death penalty threaten yet another step back. I urge the Government to uphold the Philippines' international human rights obligations, amid deeper reflection about the values that the Philippines stands for.

China is currently drafting its first national law regarding detention centres, with the aim of improving standards of treatment, oversight and accountability. I welcome this and encourage the Government to

standards of treatment, oversight and accountability. I welcome this and encourage the Government to ensure that the law grants access to independent legal counsel and family members, as well as addressing the ill-treatment in detention and deaths in custody noted by the Committee Against Torture in 2015. The recent death in custody of Nobel Peace Prize laureate Liu Xiaobo shocked many around the world, as did the deaths, also in custody, of Cao Shunli in 2014 and Tenzin Delek Rinpoche in 2015. Many more are in various forms of deprivation of liberty on questionable grounds, without any independent oversight mechanism, including Wang Quanzhang, Jiang Tianyong, Li Ming-che, Tashi Wangchuk and Liu Xia.

I am particularly concerned about action taken against defence lawyers. I commend China's emphasis on the contribution of development to the enjoyment of all human rights, and suggest it should include a greater focus on vulnerable groups, in particular among the Tibetan, Uyghur and other marginalised populations.

In Viet Nam, a revision of the Penal Code in May retained the death penalty for 18 offenses, including drug offenses not considered by the human rights mechanisms as "most serious crimes" under international law. Until recently the Vietnamese people were not permitted to know the number of people put to death every year, but in January a report released by the Ministry of Public Security stated 429 were executed by lethal injection between August 2013 and June 2016. This makes Viet Nam one of the countries which executes the most people. Official newspapers have recently reported that five new execution facilities will be built, doubling the country's current facilities. I urge Viet Nam to reconsider its position on the death penalty. I note also that people in Viet Nam who express any form of public criticism of the government or who seek to mobilize others face the risk of arrest, incommunicado detention and long sentences, in contravention of human rights standards.

In Cambodia, I am seriously concerned at the recent arrest of opposition leader Kem Sokha, which appears to have been undertaken without respect for due process guarantees or his parliamentary immunity. He has since been charged with treason. I am also concerned that numerous public statements by the Prime Minister and high-ranking officials about Kem Sokha's alleged guilt violate the presumption of innocence and the right to a fair trial. These developments have followed the closing of a well-known international NGO in Cambodia, the revocation of licences of numerous radio stations, and the shutting down of one of Cambodia's main independent newspapers. I strongly urge the Government, ahead of next year's general election, to guarantee full political and civil rights, and media freedoms. I further call on the Government to guarantee the independence of the courts; ensure due process, including the right to appeal, in all administrative measures; and to respect the rights to freedom of association and expression.

In the Maldives, as next year's elections approach, the Government is increasingly cracking down on critical views. After several Members of Parliament were stripped of their seats following an attempted no-confidence vote against the Speaker, and the unprecedented lock-down by the military on 24 July, the Parliament remains paralysed, and several of its Members and opposition leaders face charges. I am concerned by reports of continued violations of the right to a fair trial, and allegations of political bias by the judiciary and law enforcement authorities. Trust in government institutions is breaking down and I call on the Government to establish an enabling environment for the exercise of fundamental freedoms, including freedom of expression and assembly, and to respect the people's right to an independent and impartial judiciary. I deplore the Government's plan to resume capital punishment by the end of this month, after more than 65 years of moratorium. There are currently 20 individuals on death row, among them several whose convictions raise serious issues of due process, including people with mental health concerns or who were under 18 when they allegedly committed crimes. I have repeatedly intervened with the Government requesting it not to go ahead with this plan and again urge it today to step back from this harsh decision.

The Democratic People's Republic of Korea systematically and comprehensively violates the rights of its people, curtailing or extinguishing every fundamental freedom, as the Commission of Inquiry reported in 2014. The repression of civil, political, economic and social rights are without parallel in any contemporary State not engaged in war or internal conflict, and I regret to report that there has been little change to this situation in the first three years of my mandate. However, the DPRK has recently submitted a report to the Committee on the Rights of the Child, and has ratified the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and supported the visit of the Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities earlier this year; these signs of engagement with the mechanisms and treaty bodies are positive steps forward, and I hope to see others.

Mr President,

The human rights situation in Yemen is extremely alarming, and for the third time before this Council, I urge establishment of an international and independent investigative body to carry out comprehensive investigations of violations and abuses of international human rights law and international humanitarian law. I note in this context that 62 international and Yemeni NGOs have submitted a joint letter to this Council's member states echoing the urgent need for such an inquiry.

The minimal efforts made towards accountability over the past year are insufficient to respond to the gravity of the continuing and daily violations involved in this conflict. As of 30 August 2017, my Office has verified at least 5,144 civilians killed and more than 8,749 injured since the start of the conflict; actual numbers are likely to be far higher. Coalition airstrikes continue to be the leading cause of civilian casualties, including of children.

The suffering of the Yemeni people is now compounded by the grave epidemic of cholera, which is a direct result of indiscriminate attacks by parties to the conflict on medical centres and other protected objects, as well as sieges, blockades, and restrictions on movement. We continue to receive numerous reports of arbitrary or illegal detention, enforced disappearances and torture and ill-treatment by both sides to the conflict. The devastation of Yemen and the horrific suffering of its people will have immense and enduring repercussions across the region. I appeal to the parties to the conflict to reach a negotiated and durable solution, and to adhere to their obligations under international law, including by facilitating the unimpeded delivery of humanitarian relief. I urge this Council to do everything in its power to seek a rapid end to this carnage.

The conflict in Syria has redefined the meaning of the word horror. The continuation of this nightmare will forever darken the legacy of this generation of world leaders. All parties to the conflict continue to engage in action involving grave impact on civilians. My Office has documented hundreds of airstrikes and ground-based strikes in 2017 which have killed thousands of civilians across the country, at least a quarter of them children. Recent fighting in ISIL-controlled areas such as Ar-Raqqa and Deir-ez-Zor has seen ISIL fighters committing grave atrocities, as well as high numbers of civilian casualties following counter-ISIL airstrikes. The situation in eastern Ghouta, in Rural Damascus Governorate, remains highly volatile, and daily life of civilians is increasingly restricted by shelling, military clashes, the ongoing siege imposed by pro-Government forces and restrictions on their rights to freedom of expression, assembly and association. Across the country, thousands of people have been deprived of their liberty and are held in facilities run by the Government or armed opposition groups, where they are frequently subjected to torture or cruel treatment, including sexual violence. In a very high number of cases amounting to enforced disappearance, families have not been informed of the whereabouts or status of relatives.

Serious violations and abuses of the human rights have been a significant driver of this conflict in Syria, and if it is to be sustainable, those seeking to bring badly-needed peace to the country must ensure that it is grounded in international human rights standards. The work of the newly established International, Impartial and Independent Mechanism will be essential in advancing accountability, by preparing files for prosecution of individuals by other competent courts or tribunals. I continue to call for referral by the Security Council to the International Criminal Court.

In Iraq, the defeat of ISIL forces in Mosul and Talafar has released hundreds of thousands of civilians from the brutal rule of this armed group. I urge the authorities to address the long-standing grievances of all ethnic and religious communities to promote reconciliation and stability. Women should be an integral part of this process to ensure justice and accountability for past violations. I welcome the Prime Minister's announcement of investigations into allegations of serious human rights violations committed by pro-government forces. I trust their findings will be made public and swiftly followed by impartial prosecutions. I also encourage the Government to ensure that internally displaced persons are able to return to their homes as soon as possible, and that action is taken against any entity—government or otherwise— which engages in any form of collective punishment or revenge attacks. It is essential that an impartial rule of law be returned to all areas liberated from ISIL as soon as possible.

The Occupied Palestinian Territory continues to witness serious violations of international humanitarian law and human rights law by the Israeli authorities. I am concerned about the continuing violence: from 1 January until 28 August 2017 nine Israelis and 46 Palestinians were killed in the Occupied Palestinian Territory. Instances of excessive use of force, forms of collective punishment, and arbitrary detention continued to be of serious concern. Accountability for violations remains rare, as I stated in my June report. I remind the authorities that lack of accountability for violations further undermines confidence in the justice system, and perpetuates a cycle of violence.

Both in Israel and in Palestine, journalists and human rights defenders are operating under increasing

pressure from the respective authorities. Legislation passed by the Knesset in 2016 seeks to delegitimize human rights organizations working in the Occupied Territory as "anti-Israeli," and the Prime Minister has said he will seek to extend restrictions limiting foreign funding for human rights organisations. Palestinian human rights defenders also face harassment, including arrests for social media postings and peaceful protests.

In both the West Bank and in Gaza, there appears to be a crackdown by the Palestinian authorities on human rights defenders, particularly on journalists and news websites – including legislative measures, arrests and harassment of individuals and bans on websites. In Gaza, health, water, sanitation and other essential services are close to complete breakdown due to the electricity crisis, compounding the people's suffering caused by the ongoing blockade. Patients face increasing delays and denials of permits to leave Gaza for care. Israel, the State of Palestine and the authorities in Gaza are failing to meet their obligations to protect the rights of the people of Gaza.

In Egypt, the state of emergency declared in April 2017 has been used to justify the systematic silencing of civil society and closure of civic space, under the guise of countering terrorism. My Office has received reports of oppressive measures including increasing waves of arrests, arbitrary detention, black-listing, travel bans, asset freezes, intimidation and other reprisals against human rights defenders, journalists, political dissidents and anyone affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood group. We are also receiving increased allegations of torture in detention, enforced disappearances, extra-judicial killings and trials of civilians in military courts. The new NGO law adopted on 24 May, which comprehensively restricts the activities of civil society organisations, breaches international law, as well as Egypt's own Constitution. The Government has further enacted sweeping blocks on hundreds of websites and media outlets, including those of Egyptian media and international NGOs. Brutality and intimidation of the country's most thoughtful voices, cutting off the vital social and economic services provided by NGOs, and blocking information can only exacerbate radicalism and instability. I commend the human rights defenders and activists who continue, selflessly, to stand up for the rights of the people of Egypt, and I urge the Government to reverse its course and open up democratic space, to allow them to freely contribute to the development of a prosperous and open society . I repeat my offer of technical cooperation and support, and I invite Egypt to engage more productively with my Office, as well as with this Council's Special Procedures.

Since June 2016, the government of Bahrain has imposed severe restrictions on civil society and political activism through arrests, intimidation, travel bans and closure orders, with increasing reports of torture by the security authorities. Today, the democratic space in the country has essentially been shut down. I have repeatedly drawn the attention of the authorities to the gravity of the situation in the Kingdom, in conjunction with many human rights mechanisms and joint statements by Member States. I have also repeatedly offered the support of my Office to assist with practical improvements. These efforts have been met with point-blank denials, unfounded accusations and unreasonable last-minute conditions to technical missions. But no public relations campaign can paper over the violations being inflicted on the people of Bahrain. They deserve real respect for their human rights, and I continue to offer the assistance of my Office to any genuine effort to address the situation.

Iran continues to severely restrict freedom of opinion and expression. My Office has received numerous reports of human rights defenders, journalists and social media activists being arrested and detained. Ill-treatment of prisoners is widespread, and in addition the judiciary continues to sentence people to cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment, including amputation of limbs and blinding. Iran also remains the country with the highest reported rate of executions per capita. Many of those executed are drug offenders not guilty of "most serious crimes" under the terms of international law. Since the beginning of the year at least four children have been put to death, and at least 89 other children remain on death row. Last month, the Iranian Parliament passed a long-awaited amendment which raises the threshold for capital punishment in drug trafficking cases, although some narcotics offenders will still face the possibility of capital punishment. The amendment now awaits approval from the Guardian Council.

Mr President,

Last month my Office issued a report on Venezuela, highlighting excessive use of force by security officers, and multiple other human rights violations, in the context of anti-Government protests. There is a very real danger that tensions will further escalate, with the Government crushing democratic institutions and critical voices – including through criminal proceedings against opposition leaders, recourse to arbitrary detentions, excessive use of force, and ill-treatment of detainees, which in some cases amounts to torture. Venezuela is a Member State of this Council, and as such has a particular duty to "uphold the highest standards in the promotion and protection of human rights". in the words of

to uphold the highest standards in the promotion and protection of human rights, in the words of Resolution 60/251. My investigation suggests the possibility that crimes against humanity may have been committed, which can only be confirmed by a subsequent criminal investigation. While I support the concept of a national Truth and Reconciliation Commission, the current mechanism is inadequate. I therefore urge that it be reconfigured with the support and involvement of the international community. I also urge this Council to establish an international investigation into the human rights violations in Venezuela.

Corruption violates the rights of millions of people across the world, by robbing them of what should be common goods and depriving them of fundamental rights such as health and education or equal access to justice. Recent scandals, including very serious allegations levelled at high-ranking officials in Brazil and Honduras, have revealed how deeply corruption is embedded in all level of governance in many countries in the Americas, often linked to organized crime and drug trafficking. This undermines democratic institutions and erodes public trust. Progress towards uncovering, and prosecuting, corruption at high levels of government is an essential step forward in ensuring respect for the people's rights, including justice.

In Guatemala, I commend the action taken by the Constitutional Court to reverse an attempt to expel the head of the International Commission against Impunity in Guatemala, or CICIG – an independent international body whose main purpose is to support State institutions in the investigation and prosecution of corruption and organised crime. I also commend the efforts of the many people who took to the streets to support CICIG and the rights of the people of Guatemala to a more open and transparent State. I urge full support and protection for the work of those engaged in the fight against impunity and corruption. I also encourage the Government to reaffirm its commitments to uphold human rights and strengthen democratic governance and the rule of law.

In El Salvador, I remain concerned by the continuing violence in the country between members of powerful gangs and the security forces, which have given rise to alarming reports of extra-judicial killings. My Office has also received reports of threats against journalists working to document the existence of alleged death squads, including alleged collusion by security personnel. I am encouraged that some investigations have been opened and call for these efforts to be further strengthened. Journalists work to ensure the public's right to information, and their work must be protected from violence and intimidation.

In the United States, I am concerned by the Government's decision to end the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals programme in six months' time, despite evidence of its positive impact on the lives of almost 800,000 young immigrants, and on the US economy and society. I hope Congress will now act to provide former DACA beneficiaries with durable legal status. I am disturbed by the increase in detentions and deportations of well-established and law-abiding immigrants: the number of migrants detained who had no criminal convictions was 155% higher in the first five months of this year than in the equivalent period in 2016. Some migrants, including longstanding residents, are now so frightened of expedited deportation they refrain from accessing police protection and courtrooms; for example, reports of rape by Latina women in Houston fell by 43% in the first three months of 2017. I have publicly expressed my concerns about the antisemitism and racism openly voiced in Virginia last month, and which is also increasingly manifested online and in public debates. Free speech is an invaluable and essential right, under both international standards and US law, and it should not be weaponised by calls for violence and hatred.

Mr President,

Concern by Turkey's leadership for the human rights of the Rohingyas, and others in foreign countries, is deeply welcome. I encourage the Government to exercise the same consideration for the human rights situation within Turkey, which continues to deteriorate. Rights to freedom of expression and information are under relentless pressure, with very large numbers of Turkish journalists, judges, academics, civil servants and human rights defenders arrested and detained, and others dismissed or subjected to intrusive surveillance, censorship, threats and violence. Individuals suspected of connections with non-State-approved religious movements or organisations that are left-wing or focus on Kurdish issues have also been targeted. Many of these measures appear disproportionate and may be arbitrary: the arrests this summer of 10 human rights defenders associated with Amnesty International – charged with aiding an armed terror organisation for participating in a training workshop and conducting human rights work – suggest others may also be faced with abusive procedures. I call on the Government to discontinue these practices, which undermine the vital force of an open, healthy and free society.

I urge the Turkish Government not to renew the state of emergency at the end of its term next month,

and to allow adequate administrative and judicial oversight over all related procedures – including by ensuring the newly established Inquiry Commission, to handle complaints, is fully functional and independent. I also urge the Government not to undertake further steps towards reintroducing the death penalty, which would tarnish Turkey's international standing and represent a step backwards for the country. Finally, regarding my requests for access for a team of human rights observers to visit South-East Turkey, my concerns have not abated. I remain committed to engaging with Turkish authorities on this issue; in the meantime my Office will soon release a report on the human rights consequences of the state of emergency.

In Poland, I applaud the activism of the thousands of people who in July protested four reforms of the judiciary, which essentially aimed to dismantle the basics of an independent judiciary – including by giving the Government power to appoint and dismiss all judges, and to immediately terminate the appointments of all members of the Supreme Court.

Following the protests, President Duda vetoed two bills and returned them to Parliament. However, two others have entered into force – ensuring, among other key points, that the Government can appoint and dismiss all Presidents of regional tribunals, who decide which judges preside over which cases. I deplore the Government's increasingly visible control of key institutions, including the constitutional tribunal and national broadcast media. I urge the authorities to recall the Polish people's recent and magnificent history of struggle for human rights and liberty, and to respect, protect and promote their rights to an independent judiciary, due process, independent media, and fundamental freedoms.

In the Republic of Moldova, I am concerned by reported cases of prosecution and harassment of lawyers representing opposition figures, human rights defenders and journalists. Reprisals against NGOs, removal of a judge and cases of arrests of public officials on allegedly fabricated charges also raise concerns. Some of the proposed amendments to the law on NGOs would significantly obstruct the activities of civil society groups receiving funds from abroad. I encourage the Government to fully uphold the rights to freedom of opinion, expression, assembly and association in the course of any such reforms, and to urgently strengthen the country's human rights machinery, and to call on the expertise and assistance of my Office. Any legislative changes should aim to widen the space for a strong, free and independent civil society and should be preceded by transparent and inclusive consultations with civil society organizations.

Regarding the human rights situation in Hungary, I join the European Parliament and a wide range of other bilateral and supra-national bodies in regretting the deterioration of rule of law and fundamental rights in recent years. Vital aspects of freedom of expression have been undermined, including independence of the media and academic freedom. In June, new legislation on NGOs introduced additional restrictions on civil society, only the latest in a series of measures tightening the democratic space. I also deplore the drastic and inhumane procedures which limit access by migrants to even basic services. Asylum-seekers confined to transit zones who require emergency medical assistance are transported to local hospitals in handcuffs and under armed guard, and migrant children are automatically and unlawfully detained for long periods.

With migrants and refugees in many parts of Europe facing such hostility and inhumanity, the people of the tiny island of Tilos, in Greece, have shown it is entirely possible to welcome them in dignity and with respect. Despite the country's recession and severe cuts in public spending, municipal authorities, assisted by NGOs and many local volunteers, have taken in families requesting asylum and candidates for relocation to other EU countries – integrating the children in the local school and enabling adults to seek work. I honour and commend this example of human decency.

Mr President,

Secretary General Guterres has appealed for a rational debate about migration, in full respect for human rights. I very much hope the Global Compact on Migration will result in migration governance that is better grounded in human rights. A month ago, several NGOs were compelled to limit or halt their life-saving activities in the Central Mediterranean, after the Libyan coastguard reportedly banned search and rescue operations in international waters near Libya, and allegedly threatened any NGO that continued to rescue migrants. NGOs are now entering the area at their own risk. I call on Libya, the European Union and its member States to ensure that NGOs are not endangered in these rescues; they are saving the lives of considerable numbers of men, women and children. I also repeat that impeding search and rescue, endangering migrants in distress at sea, and returning anyone to a place where they may face torture or other serious abuses would constitute a violation of obligations under the Law of the Sea and international human rights law.

I am appalled at the horrific abuses migrants face after being intercepted and returned to Libya. Extra-judicial killings, slavery, torture, rape, human trafficking and starvation are only some of the abuses reportedly inflicted on migrants in both official and informal detention centres in the country. I remind all EU governments, and indeed all governments worldwide, that no human being may ever, under any circumstances, be deported to a place where he or she faces the likelihood of torture and human rights violations. Given the prevailing impunity and lawlessness in parts of Libya, I am extremely disturbed by recent reports suggesting that armed groups are now stopping and detaining migrants trying to leave the country, possibly with the encouragement of some Member States of the EU. The EU and its member States must ensure that any cooperation agreement with Libya fully respects the rights and dignity of migrants.

Mr President,

I am deeply alarmed by the sharp deterioration in security conditions in large parts of the Central African Republic in recent months, especially in the southeast. I am extremely concerned about persistent reports of atrocity crimes, which have pushed the country very close to a complete breakdown along religious and ethnic lines. Increasing attacks against aid workers have forced a number of humanitarian organizations to suspend life-saving activities in parts of the country, and in recent months tens of thousands of civilians have been forced to flee areas where violence is intensifying. Anti-Balaka and ex-Seleka forces, as well as various splinter groups, are responsible for the escalating cycles of reprisal attacks, which are fuelled by incitement to hatred and violence by religious leaders and other leading figures. I urge public officials to promptly condemn all calls to violence. I welcome steps made towards the operationalization of the Special Criminal Court, the National Commission for Truth and Reconciliation, the Human Rights Commission and a National Committee for the Prevention of Genocide. These measures towards accountability will help to remind all armed groups and commanders of the risks they incur in committing grave violations of the people's rights.

There is also a very critical need for accountability for violations in South Sudan. The country is being quite simply destroyed, with one million South Sudanese now seeking shelter from the devastating violence in Uganda, and one million more in other countries. Aid organisations have reported a record number of incidents of obstruction and looting of humanitarian aid in recent months. In addition to the appalling levels of violence and sexual violence by all parties to the conflict, I am also concerned by reports of arbitrary detention of people perceived to be critical of the Government. While the National Dialogue continues, it is essential that all South Sudanese be allowed the space to express their views freely without fear of reprisal. I again repeat my insistent warning that the Hybrid Court for South Sudan must be established, as detailed in the Peace Agreement, in order to address the massive violations which fuel these cycles of violence. I also welcome this Council's decision to task the Commission on Human Rights in South Sudan with gathering evidence with a view to the prosecution of perpetrators. The Deputy High Commissioner will report to the Council in greater detail later in this session.

The human rights situation in Burundi has in no way improved, as most recently was noted by the Commission of Inquiry on Burundi, with continuing reports of disappearances and killings, arbitrary arrests, detention and torture of perceived opponents. Most opposition parties, independent NGOs and media have been banned or suspended, leaving virtually no space for civil liberties and open debate. The political impasse has had devastating impact on the economic and social rights of the people. The Commission of Inquiry will report to the Council later in this Session on its findings and recommendations. In light of these continuing most serious violations I again recall that Member States of this Council, including Burundi, have a particular duty to "uphold the highest standards in the promotion and protection of human rights". I call on Burundi to carefully review and implement the report of the Commission of Inquiry, and to urgently act to put an end to the violations and abuses committed by its security forces and the Imbonerakure.

In Mali, delays in implementing the peace agreement, and weak or absent state institutions across large parts of the country, are factors that contribute to the increasing activity of terrorist groups and criminal gangs across much of the Sahel region. Any effective strategy to combat violent extremism must seek to address underlying factors such as poverty, lack of basic services, corruption, marginalisation and discrimination, and human rights violations committed by institutions that are mandated to protect the population. I welcome the decision by Burkina Faso, Niger, Chad, Mauritania and Mali to establish a joint G5 force to address these challenges. And I emphasise the need for these countries to ensure that all members of this force – including gendarmes, police officers and military forces from all five contributing countries – abide by human rights due diligence principles.

In Sudan, I welcome a reduction of hostilities in Darfur. However, very significant concerns remain, including on accountability. Since January the UNAMID Human Rights Section has recorded an increase in human rights violations and attacks against civilian populations, in particular internally displaced people. Many of these are attributable to government security forces and related militias which continue to operate with impunity in the region of Darfur.

In the Democratic Republic of Congo, I am deeply concerned that in the absence of any clear progress towards elections, in line with the 31 December political agreement, inter-communal violence appears to be escalating in several parts of the country, including in Tanganyika province and in North and South Kivu. A mission by my Office to interview refugees who have fled the Kasai regions has reported a horrific range of violations. I regret that despite some ongoing investigations and a number of convictions of alleged members of the Kamuina Nsapu militia, there has been insufficient progress towards establishing credible, impartial and independent investigations for serious human rights violations committed by the defence and security forces. The Council has mandated an international team of experts to work with the authorities to investigate these ongoing violations in the Kasai regions, and I look forward to their findings and recommendations.

However, the authorities must also act immediately to prevent further atrocities and to protect the people's rights. The Deputy High Commissioner will report to this Council at greater length regarding the human rights situation in the DRC.

In Ethiopia, I welcome the lifting of the State of Emergency last month, and I look forward to measures to improve human rights protections, ensure accountability for violations and to address the root causes of social discontent, in line with both national and international human rights recommendations. I urge the Government to release individuals who may have been arbitrarily arrested and detained for exercising their rights to freedom of expression and association, and to ensure that all pending cases fully respect due process and the rights related to fair trial guarantees. I look forward to continuing my fruitful cooperation with the Government.

I welcome the continuing cooperation between my Office and the Government of the Republic of Congo, including the Government's commitment – made to my Office last week – to create a commission to investigate allegations of extrajudicial killings and other serious violations that have taken place from 2015 to the current violent crisis in the Pool region. I also welcome the Government's commitment to address the situation of the many people in allegedly illegal detention. I expect swift action by the Government to move forward on these and other measures.

Mr President,

In the first three years of my current term, the world has grown darker and dangerous. My vision for the work of my Office has become more determined, drawing even more deeply on the lessons which come to us from our forbears: human rights principles are the only way to avoid global war and profound misery and deprivation.

In continuing to lead this Office I am inspired by movements of people standing up in many countries in defiance of the indefensible. They seek, not power or personal profit; what they seek is justice.

Thank you.