Foreign & Commonwealth Office (UK)

"Human rights are intertwined with so much of what the Security Council does."

2017-04-18

Thank you Madam President for calling this important debate. I welcome the clear Security Council support for discussing this issue. I also thank the Secretary-General for his briefing, and strongly agree with all of it.

The United Kingdom is committed to the promotion and protection of human rights worldwide. Not just because this is the right thing to do but also because it is a cornerstone of peace, stability and security and a tool for conflict prevention.

The Security Council has a clear role to play. It is necessary in order for us to do the job the United Nations Charter gave us. It is absolutely not encroachment, for the reasons the Secretary-General so eloquently set out.

Too often after a conflict the international community looks back and concludes that more should have been done at the outset, and that warning signs had not been acted upon. All too often those warning signs involve human rights violations and abuses.

Twenty-five years ago, the Special Rapporteur on extra-judicial executions reported on allegations of killings in Rwanda. A year later, his successor visited Rwanda, and later warned the Commission for Human Rights of his fears of potential genocide. We all know now the consequences of the international community not responding decisively to those concerns. Today the international community is being asked the same questions and given similar warnings in South Sudan, and we need to come up with better answers.

The situation in Syria also shows the clear connection between human rights violations and conflict. A regime faced in 2011 by peaceful protests from its people responded not with reform, but with repression and violence. We have seen where this has led: a civil war; a huge rise in violent extremism; death and forced disappearances; a refugee crisis; regional instability and even the use of chemical weapons against civilians.

The story of Masri, a Syrian man, is sadly just one example. He was arrested after participating in a peaceful protest at the start of the conflict. He was tortured, starved and interrogated over two years in four detention facilities, and then taken to a regime hospital that has been described as a ‘slaughterhouse.’ A rare survivor, he was taken back to the

notorious Sednaya Prison for another year of torture. He was eventually released; but by the time he returned home, he screamed at his own reflection in the mirror. He did not recognise himself; a ghostly skeleton of a human standing where he once stood.

And that's an illustration of why repeated abuses of the veto in this Council to block accountability for violations of international humanitarian law and human rights abuses in Syria are so damaging. They reinforce the Syrian regime's certainty that they can get away carrying out gross violations of human rights with impunity. The United Kingdom will continue to do our utmost to hold accountable the perpetrators of all such violations and abuses.

And that is why the United Kingdom also welcomes, Secretary-General, your continued focus on prevention, and this includes your support for your predecessor's Human Rights Upfront initiative, which seeks to bring the UN system together to prioritise human rights, and work together on cross cutting issues. It also seeks to ensure that the UN does all it can not just to respond to, but to prevent, serious violations or abuses of human rights – and we have seen time and again how detrimental those are to peace and security.

Two institutions of the United Nations are particularly vital to delivering this joined up approach to human rights. First, the High Commissioner for Human Rights and his Office provide invaluable support to UN peace operations. They advise on mandates, they carry out strategic assessment missions to South Sudan, Liberia and Mali, they send technical and operational support missions to Iraq, & Kosovo to name just a few from the last year. We welcome the interactions between this Council and the UN High Commissioner and his Office.

Second, is the Human Rights Council. Like many others, we are concerned when countries with poor human rights records get on to the Human Rights Council. But the Human Rights Council nevertheless plays a central role in responding to human rights violations that pose imminent threats to peace and security. Every country, including the worst offenders, have a Universal Periodic Review, they have to explain policies and actions. The United Kingdom particularly values the role the Human Rights Council plays in overseeing the special rapporteurs and other investigative mechanisms such as Commissions of Inquiry. Crucially for this Security Council's work, these vital tools help provide objective and professionally-gathered information on how potential or active conflicts are evolving.

Madam President, human rights are intertwined with so much of what the Security Council does. The United Kingdom welcomes this debate. This Council cannot fully discharge our responsibility enshrined in the UN Charter to maintain international peace and security, without addressing human rights every single day.

Source: https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/human-rights-are-intertwined-with-so-much-of-what-the-security-council-does