



**Statement by H.E. Simon Coveney, TD,
Minister of Foreign Affairs and Minister of Defence of Ireland
High-level segment of the 46th session of the Human Rights Council**

24 February 2020

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is an honour to address this 46th session of the Human Rights Council.

Last year, we had the privilege of coming together in person in Geneva for the Council session. The intervening 12 months have challenged every one of us.

The Coronavirus pandemic has preoccupied our thoughts and actions. Today I think it is important to acknowledge first the catastrophic loss of life, and the devastating impact that the virus has wreaked on communities across the globe.

The development of vaccines brings with it hope for the period ahead, but a hope that will only be realised through an approach based on equality and human rights.

We know that COVID, directly and indirectly, has contributed to a worsening of the human rights situation for many. So, even if it is in virtual format for now, it is crucial that we continue to meet to progress the human rights agenda that this Council promotes.

In these uncertain times, strong and principled leadership on human rights is greatly needed. And I thank High Commissioner Bachelet and her Office for consistently providing this leadership.

Ireland will remain a steadfast supporter of your Office's work and its independence.

Madame President

Commitment to human rights is a cornerstone of Irish foreign policy. It informs our actions at this Council and as a newly elected member of the UN Security Council.

It is at the heart of our global engagement: from development, to humanitarian action and peacekeeping, from global health to disarmament and arms control.

We see a commitment to human rights as fundamental to the delivery of the vision of **Agenda 2030** and the **Sustainable Development Goals**. Collectively, we have a responsibility in particular to ensure a greater focus on ensuring gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls.

At this moment of crisis, as we strive together to respond to, and recover from, the pandemic, we need to recognise that a human rights-based approach is essential to the rebuilding of an interdependent world facing crises of inequality, conflict and climate change.

Over recent months, while tackling the pandemic, we have also faced:

- conflicts and regional rivalries;
- the undermining of democracy and rule of law in every region;
- pressure on international arms control regimes;
- the threat posed by terrorist organisations and other non-state actors, and
- the global challenge of climate change, a multiplier of conflict and instability.

Regrettably, in every region, including my own, we see unacceptable pressures exerted to limit the most fundamental of freedoms, sometimes under the pretext of responding to the challenges presented by the pandemic.

Ireland is a long standing champion of **civic space**, in Geneva, in New York and in communities worldwide. We remain gravely concerned by the unacceptable pressures being experienced by civil society around the world, including human rights defenders, LGBTI defenders, journalists and media workers.

We fundamentally believe that as governments, as an international community, we will fail to chart a sustainable course through this current global crisis, if we do not listen to our citizens, and if we do not support a safe and enabling environment for them to enjoy their most basic of freedoms.

Having struggled 100 years ago for our own independence, the Irish people are deeply troubled by moves to reject or interfere with the results of democratic elections.

Ireland viewed it as critical therefore that the Human Rights Council took action this month to address the coup in **Myanmar**, and continues to condemn the actions carried out by the military including the unlawful detention of political prisoners, human rights defenders and journalists. We see it as equally important that the human rights situation in **Belarus** is on the Council's agenda this session.

Because of our experience on our own island, we understand that conflict resolution must be based on peaceful and inclusive engagement, democratic principles and human rights.

That is why Ireland remains a steadfast and vocal supporter of the **Middle East Peace Process**.

A negotiated two-State solution based on international law and the internationally agreed parameters endorsed in multiple UN Security Council resolutions, represents the only realistic way to achieve a just and lasting peace for the Israeli and Palestinian peoples.

For too long the global community has borne witness to the tragic impact of man-made humanitarian crises on the lives of civilians. The levels of suffering being endured by the people of **Syria** and **Yemen** are shameful cases in point.

Events in **Ethiopia** in recent months are also a cause of grave concern with insufficient humanitarian assistance reaching Tigray and serious human rights violations and abuses being committed against the civilian population.

At the Human Rights Council, Ireland will continue to call in unequivocal terms for adherence to international law, including international humanitarian law and international human rights law, to protect civilians especially children, who have always endured the brunt of conflicts.

Madame President,

Last year, in my address to this Council I spoke about attempts to undermine multilateralism and I echoed calls for a “*pushback against the pushback*”.

Then, I emphasised the need to persevere with the fight for our multilateral system, as the best and most effective means of finding solutions for all for the global challenges that we face.

In the intervening period and against the backdrop of the pandemic, it is commendable that the Human Rights Council has continued its work.

The clear message to the world is that this Council matters. Imperfect as all human institutions are, the UN, the Human Rights Council and the human rights mechanisms are indispensable to the effort to build a better world. They are also indispensable to the vindication of the rights of the most vulnerable, whose voices would not otherwise be heard.

As States it remains our responsibility to debate, discuss, negotiate and engage with one another, to improve the system; to make it better equipped to work on behalf of the global community that it was designed to protect.

I am optimistic that, despite the unprecedented challenges we are facing, we are at a point of opportunity, where change, real change, appears possible and within our grasp. We can show that multilateralism works.

All too often, this Council has to grapple with the worst of humanity. Let us use this moment of challenge to reassert our belief in our interdependence, and our commitment to achieving a better life for all on the planet.

Thank you