

Addressing Human Rights Council, UN rights chief decries some States' lack of cooperation

6 June 2017 – In a major address in Geneva, the United Nations human rights chief today stressed that denying access or not cooperating with UN bodies would not diminish scrutiny of a Government's human rights record.

Addressing the 35th session of the Human Rights Council, Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein, decried some Governments for cutting off or selectively choosing how they cooperate with his office and UN bodies.

"It would be intolerable if delegations were to conclude that by maintaining minimal engagement with the human rights mechanisms they can [evade or betray those commitments](#) to their own peoples, and to the peoples of the world," the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights said in an oral update this morning to the Council.

He underscored that every Government is party to at least one of the nine [core human rights treaties](#) and has accepted that it "is the duty of States, regardless of their political, economic and cultural systems, to promote and protect all human rights and fundamental freedom."

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Mr. Zeid noted that the world sees increasingly the results of discrimination, deprivation and injustice – in the escalation of crises and suffering, and the outbreak of war. "Whether or not individual leaders consider this truth convenient, it is nonetheless a fact that denial of human rights in one country concerns every State in the Organization," he stressed.

With a mandate from the international community to promote and protect all human rights, his office ([OHCHR](#)) represents the world's commitment to universal ideals of human dignity. Its thematic priorities include strengthening international human rights mechanisms; enhancing equality and countering discrimination; and early warning and protection of human rights in situations of conflict, violence and insecurity. It also supports the work of UN human rights mechanisms, including the Human Rights Council.

Taking place at the UN Office in Geneva, the Council's session will last three weeks and tackle a range of human rights issues currently before the world.

Refusal to cooperate with UN bodies

The senior UN official also spoke out against some Governments' decisions to keep UN rights experts out of their borders, and rallied against "absolutely unacceptable" incidents of threats and insults directed at UN Special Rapporteurs.

"I strongly contest the self-serving argument presented by some, that this Council should avoid addressing [country situations](#) – a view which is usually voiced by leaders of States that feature few independent institutions, and which sharply curtail fundamental freedoms," he stated.

He specified, for example, the Government of Burundi, which was elected to the Council in 2015, yet "continues to commit some of the most serious human rights violation dealt with by this Council" and has suspended all cooperation with the Office of the High Commissioner (OHCHR).

"In September the Council's independent mission was declared persona non grata, and the current Commission of Inquiry has not been able to enter the country," Mr. Zeid added.

He noted a number of countries which are not members of the Council, which have not permitted any visits by Special Procedures representatives, such as Special Rapporteurs.

Included in this group is Syria, which has cut off access to OHCHR and the Syrian Commission of Inquiry.

"This is notwithstanding the continued horrific suffering of the Syrian people, particularly in besieged communities. I repeat my call for the release of all detainees wrongfully imprisoned in Syria," Mr. Zeid urged.

As for the already-dire situation in the Kasai provinces of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), which continues to deteriorate, spreading to other provinces and across the border with Angola, Mr. Zeid said that given the difficulties in accessing the areas where violations and abuses are occurring, he will be dispatching a team to the region next week to meet with people fleeing the attacks.

"Unless I receive appropriate responses from the Government regarding a joint investigation by 8 June, I will insist on the creation of an international investigative mechanism for the Kasais," he stated.



The Human Rights Council chamber in Geneva. UN Photo/Elma Okic

Turning to representatives of his office, Mr. Zeid expressed very serious concern about intimidation and reprisals brought on by State officials against people who engage with the UN on human rights. He specifically mentioned smear and hate campaigns against the Special Rapporteurs on Myanmar, Summary Executions in the context of discussions on the Philippines,

and on Iran.

“When Government or other officials intimidate, arrest or harm these individuals, they are attacking a fundamental element of the work of this Council and the UN, and it is our responsibility to do all we can to protect them,” Mr. Zeid said.

He noted also that the Council’s next annual report would focus on reprisals, and called for cooperation with Assistant Secretary-General Andrew Gilmour, who is leading UN action on that issue.

Condemning terrorism in all forms

Mr. Zeid began his address with a strong condemnation of terrorism throughout the world.

“The brutality of Da’esh [also known as the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, or ISIL] and other terrorist groups seemingly knows no bounds,” he said.

“Yesterday, my staff reported to me that bodies of murdered Iraqi men, women and children are still lying on the streets of the al-Shira neighbourhood of western Mosul, after at least 163 people were shot and killed by Da’esh on 1 June to prevent them from fleeing.”

After condemning the attacks, he called for Governments to eradicate the threat, but he cautioned against trampling on people’s rights.

“Please remember this: for every citizen wrongfully detained under a vague anti-terrorism law, and humiliated, abused, or tortured, it is not simply one individual who then nurses a grievance against the authorities, but most of their family too. Send one innocent person to prison, and you may deliver six or seven family members into the hands of those who oppose the government, with a few who may even go further than that.”

The UN Human Rights Council is an inter-governmental body within the UN system responsible for strengthening the promotion and protection of human rights around the globe and for addressing situations of human rights violations and make recommendations on them. It was setup by the UN General Assembly in March 2006, and replaced the Commission on Human Rights.

The Council is made up of 47 UN Member States which are elected by the General Assembly.