

Human Rights Council election: 5 things you need to know about it

The United Nations General Assembly held secret-ballot elections for the [Human Rights Council](#) (HRC) on Friday. As of 1 January next year, the [18 newly-elected States](#) will serve for three years on the UN's highest inter-governmental body, mandated to protect and promote human rights worldwide.

While the institution has been the subject of controversy since its creation in 2006 – culminating in the withdrawal of the USA this past June – UN [Secretary-General António Guterres reiterated](#) that it plays “a very important role” in the UN's human rights architecture.

1. First of all... how does it all work?

Elections to the Council happen annually, with countries serving for three years on a rotational basis, as some of the seats expire on 31 December every year. There are 47 seats, equitably distributed according to five regional divisions.

Countries need a minimum of 97 votes to get elected, and everything happens by secret ballot. This year, 18 seats were up for election: five for Africa, five for Asia-Pacific, two for Eastern Europe, three for Latin America and the Caribbean, and three for Western Europe and other States.

2. So... who's in and who's out?

After Friday's election, here's how the Council will look from 1 January:

- **IN, elected this year:** Argentina, Austria, Bahamas, Bahrain, Bangladesh, Bulgaria, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Czech Republic, Denmark, Eritrea, Fiji, India, Italy, Philippines, Somalia, Togo and Uruguay.
- **IN, continuing their terms:** Angola, DRC, Egypt, Nigeria, Rwanda, Senegal, South Africa, Tunisia, Afghanistan, China, Iraq, Japan, Nepal, Pakistan, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Croatia, Hungary, Slovakia, Ukraine, Brazil, Chile, Cuba, Mexico, Peru, Australia, Iceland, Spain, and United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland.
- **OUT, because they didn't apply for a second consecutive term:** Belgium, Burundi, Ecuador, Georgia, Kyrgyzstan, Mongolia, Panama, Slovenia and Switzerland.
- **OUT, because after two consecutive terms, they're not eligible for re-election:** Côte d'Ivoire, Ethiopia, Kenya, the Republic of Korea, the United Arab Emirates, Venezuela and Germany.

3. What does the Council actually do?

In a nutshell, the HRC is a multilateral forum to discuss anything relating to human rights issues around the world.

In addition to launching fact-finding missions and establishing commissions of inquiry into specific situations, it meets three times a year to review the human rights records of all UN Member States, in a special process designed to give countries the chance to present the actions they have taken, and what they've done, to advance human rights. This is known as the Universal Periodic Review.

This video explains it all in a simple way:

4. How come some countries accused of human rights violations still serve?

The HRC was created in 2006, following a proposal by former Secretary-General Kofi Annan. In a report titled "[In Larger Freedom](#)", he noted that the Commission on Human Rights, created in 1946, was suffering from "declining credibility and professionalism" and was "in need of major reform". Subsequently, based on his recommendations, the Human Rights Council was [established](#) by the General Assembly to replace the Commission and several measures were put in place to try and avoid the same problems that eventually arose with the Commission.

For example, as it is understood that the Council can only be as effective as its Member States, the election process was placed directly in the hands of the General Assembly, the only UN organ where every one of the 193 countries has equal voting weight.

In addition, the geographical group divisions and seat allocations are meant to prevent disproportionate focus on just a handful of regions and countries, and ensure that every country has a chance of fair consideration.

Finally, during the elections for each regional group, the General Assembly allows extra blank slates: this should theoretically ensure there are more candidates than available seats, enabling a competitive process. However, if – as was the case this year with 18 candidacies for 18 available seats – no extra countries apply, then no competition occurs, and whichever Member State applies, is likely to get elected.

5. So does the HRC make a difference for human rights worldwide?

Although human rights have always been a very sensitive matter for Member States, the Human Rights Council remains an essential part of the UN's human rights architecture.

[The Council has the power](#) to adopt resolutions, launch fact-finding missions and investigations, and establish commissions of inquiry. In particular, the HRC can appoint independent experts on specific issues. At the moment, there are 44 [thematic](#) experts and 11 [country](#) ones appointed to monitor and report on human rights issues as requested.

All these mechanisms allow for grave violations to be highlighted and brought up on the global stage for examination, discussion and, whenever feasible, action.

Continuing incarceration of women's rights activists in Saudi Arabia, 'reprehensible': UN experts

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The detained have been charged for being involved in pro-democracy demonstrations, and previously campaigning for the right of women to vote and drive. In late June, a long-standing ban on women driving in Saudi Arabia, was lifted by royal decree.

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– *UN Experts on Human Rights*

The group of nine independent experts – UN Special Rapporteurs and working group members – said they condemned the actions of the Saudi authorities in continuing to detain the women rights defenders, “in the strongest possible terms,” calling for their “immediate and unconditional” release.

A group of those indicted – Samar Badawi, Nassima Al-Sadah, Nouf Abdulaziz, Mayya Al-Zahrani, and Hatoon Al-Fassi – are being held in detention, without any channels of communication. The five were particularly active in demonstrations for women's rights.

In Friday's statement, the experts urged Saudi authorities “to immediately make the whereabouts of these five human rights defenders known and to grant them access to their families and lawyers.”

The group of women also include Israa Al-Ghomghan, who faces possible execution despite being denied representation during her trial, and is being tried in Riyadh's Specialized Criminal Court, an entity set up for terrorism-related cases.

“It is reprehensible that Ms. Al-Ghomagham is facing the death penalty for asserting her fundamental right to peaceful assembly,” the UN experts stressed.

They added that women rights defenders are subject to particular risks and vulnerable to widespread gender-based discrimination, signaling the Saudi administration's duty to its people.

"We wish to remind the Saudi Government of its obligation to protect and promote the rights of all human rights defenders as they peacefully carry out their legitimate work," said the experts.

[UN welcomes 'milestone' release of 833 children from anti-Boko Haram force in NE Nigeria](#)

The United Nations welcomed on Friday as an "important milestone" the release in Nigeria of 833 children by the Civilian Joint Task Force (CJTF); a group formed in 2013 to protect communities and support the country's security forces against Boko Haram extremists.

"This is an important development for boys and girls of north-east Nigeria whose lives have been deeply affected by violence and insecurity," said the UN Special Representative for Children and Armed Conflict, [Virginia Gamba](#). "I also want to highlight that today's release of children is the result of months of productive work and collaboration between the CJTF and the United Nations... We expect more children to be separated from the CJTF soon."

For over nine years, Nigeria's north-east has been in the grip of a brutal conflict between various non-state armed groups, including Boko Haram, and the Nigerian military. This has resulted in the recruitment of thousands of children by the various militias.

This release by the CJTF comes after it was named in the UN Secretary-General's Annual Report for Children and Armed Conflict and an [action plan](#) was subsequently developed and signed in September 2017. In the agreement, the group committed to ending and preventing the recruitment of children and agreed to release all children from their ranks.

The United Nations has supported this process by providing training and awareness raising sessions to members of the CJTF and communities.

This is the first formal release since the agreement, but the [UN Children's Fund](#) (UNICEF) estimates that another 600 boys and girls remain within the ranks of the CJTF in the city of Maiduguri, and many more youngsters remain in other armed groups, either in combat or support roles.

"The release of these children from CJTF shows commitment to implement the

provisions of the Action Plan and to uphold international humanitarian law, human rights laws as well as other regional and national legislations, protecting children's rights," said Pernille Ironside, Deputy Representative of UNICEF in Nigeria.

We have an opportunity to help these children heal and rebuild their lives – Special Representative Virginia Gamba.

Special Representative Gamba noted that the Nigerian authorities will be providing reintegration services to all children released today, with support from UNICEF and other child protection organizations.

"We have an opportunity to help these children heal and rebuild their lives," said the Special Representative. "I call on all those who can support this process to work with us to ensure they have access to the best possible services."

Since 2017, UNICEF and its partners have supported the Nigeria authorities in its efforts to reintegrate more than 8,700 children released by parties to the conflict. This work has involved tracing their families, getting them home and offering psychological and economic support, an education, vocational trainings, as well as helping them overcome the stigma they face from their association with armed groups.

While today's release of children is an "important milestone" for the protection of children in Nigeria, Ms. Gamba regretted that children in the country's north-east continue to be subjected to grave violations.

During the first six months of 2018 alone, 37 children, the majority of whom were girls, were used as 'human bombs' to harm civilians. During the same period, 349 children were killed or maimed, and another 140 children were abducted.

The Special Representative also expressed concern over children detained by the authorities for their – or their parents' – alleged association with non-state armed groups. Calling on the Nigerian Government to consider these children primarily as victims, she appealed for a handover of these children to civilian care "without delay".

UN chief praises Malaysia's death penalty repeal as 'major step forward'

Malaysia has announced that it plans to abolish executions, a move hailed by United Nations chief António Guterres on Thursday, as a "major step forward."

The nation joins some 170 other States that have implemented a moratorium, or ended the practice of the death penalty; a policy that the Secretary-General endorsed earlier this week, commemorating the World Day against the Death Penalty, on 10 October.

Spokesperson for Mr. Guterres, Stéphane Dujarric, said in a statement that the UN chief saw the decision as a stride toward eliminating the death penalty worldwide.

“The Secretary-General commends this decision as a major step forward in a global movement towards the universal abolition of the death penalty,” said the statement.

In the United States on Thursday, the Pacific north-western state of Washington’s supreme court also announced that it was striking down the death penalty on constitutional grounds, making Washington one of 19 US states who’ve imposed a ban.

[Earlier this week](#), the UN Chief urged all nations to “put an end to the death penalty now,” noting that in some parts of the world, executions are still carried out in secret, or without due process.

Mr. Dujarric said that in Secretary-General’s salute to Malaysia’s repeal, the chief “seizes this opportunity to call on all countries which still retain it, to follow the encouraging example of Malaysia.”

[Australia urged to evacuate offshore detainees amid widespread, acute mental distress](#)

Australia should end its offshore processing policy on the Pacific islands of Nauru and Papua New Guinea amid reports of widespread, acute mental distress and attempted suicide by children and young adults, the UN refugee agency, [UNHCR](#), said on Friday.

“In one of the various cases brought to our attention during September, a suicidal pre-teenage girl remains in Nauru despite doctors’ advice to the contrary,” UNHCR spokesperson Catherine Stubblefield told journalists in Geneva. “Medical records seen by UNHCR staff show she first doused herself in petrol, before attempting to set herself alight and pulling chunks of hair from her head.”

According to UNHCR, more than 1,400 people are still being held on both islands, which have hosted Australia-bound migrants and asylum-seekers

forcibly transferred there, since 2013.

There's no longer time for the Government of Australia to delay or find other solutions, and it's for that reason that we're asking people be evacuated today – *Catherine Stubblefield, UNHCR*

The UN agency's appeal to the Australian authorities echoes a warning from non-governmental organization Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) which pulled out of Nauru last week, at the request of the island's authorities.

In the last 11 months on Nauru, according to MSF, at least 78 people attempted suicide, had suicidal thoughts or self-harmed.

Amid a "collapsing health situation", UNHCR explained that around 500 people have been returned to Australia on medical grounds, but this is "significantly lower" than all those with acute needs.

There have been no returns from Papua New Guinea to Australia this year, the UN agency noted, despite "several instances" of self-harm or attempted suicide there in the past month.

In addition, a number of people with acute physical and mental needs remain untreated, UNHCR said.

"This policy has failed on a number of measures," Mrs Stubblefield said. "It's failed to protect refugees, it's failed to provide even for their most basic needs throughout a period that now exceeds five years. And it's failed to provide solutions for a substantial number that is still waiting and can clearly no longer afford to wait."

The UNHCR spokesperson reported that of the 12 people who have died since Australia began detaining migrants and refugees offshore, half had been confirmed or suspected suicides. The mental health of those being held on the islands was worsening, she added.

"Our own consultant medical experts in 2016 found a cumulative prevalence of anxiety, depression and PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder) in both Papua New Guinea and Nauru, to be well above 80 per cent, and the situation has deteriorated since then," Mrs Stubblefield said. "So, there are very serious needs that are not being met. There's no longer time for the Government of Australia to delay or find other solutions, and it's for that reason that we're asking people be evacuated today."

'Responsibility lies with Australia'

Highlighting the case of a young Iranian man who took his life in June after spending "most of his adult life" in offshore processing, the UNHCR spokesperson underscored Australia's obligations to those under its care.

"Ultimately, responsibility lies with Australia for those who have sought its protection," Mrs Stubblefield said. "As we mentioned, this is a system

designed, financed, managed by Australia, and it's Australia which must be accountable for the full gamut of those consequences."

Among UNHCR's concerns is the lack of basic services available to vulnerable migrants and asylum-seekers.

Only "limited" healthcare is provided on both islands by sub-contractors on hire from the Australian Government, Mrs Stubberfield said, describing the service as "under-resourced and under-staffed".