Advancing human rights, a ‘never ending process’ says new UN rights chief

From UN News, October 2019 - In August, Michelle Bachelet, twice-elected President of Chile and the first head of UN Women, was confirmed as the new UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, replacing Zeid Ra’ad Al Hussein.

As the UN’s top human rights official, the High Commissioner is mandated to promote and protect the enjoyment and full realization, by all people, of all rights established in the Charter of the United Nations and under international human rights laws and treaties.

The mandate also includes preventing human rights violations, promoting international cooperation to protect human rights, being the coordinator of action across the UN, and strengthening and streamlining the whole UN system in the field of human rights.

Minutes after she was approved, UN chief Antonio Guterres told reporters he was “delighted” by the news of her official appointment, describing Ms. Bachelet, a “pioneer”, has been “as formidable a figure in her native Chile, as she has at the United Nations”.

Shortly after assuming office in early September, Ms. Bachelet was in New York for the General Assembly’s high-level general debate. She spoke with UN News on the rights situation around the world, the priorities for her tenure, and how can rights be better protected.
Bearing in mind her own personal experience of being detained and tortured in Chile, the interview started with a question on how she overcame the hardships she suffered under the military dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet.

Michelle Bachelet: I think that, for one hand, probably because, in my family, as a child, I had a very caring and loving environment. My mom and me are very resilient, if I may say, because I think that helps a lot.

But [...] there was a period of my life that I really hated what was happening – I had so much rage. But afterwards, I started thinking, "you know what, I do not want this to happen anymore in Chile or in any other country of the world. So, what can I do to contribute, that Chile will be a peaceful, democratic society?"

So, I sort of put all my energies on that, and that is why I started working on defence issues to be able to speak to the militaries, because I never thought I was going to be Minister of the Defence or President of the Republic.

So, I said: they understand the full power, I will have the power of knowledge; to be able to be a counterpart on discussing this issue. And then we started building a process of reconciliation, and saying, look, we might never agree on what happened in the past, but we
all love the nation, we need to ensure that the future of the democracy in the nation is not in danger.

I would say it permitted me to understand that, first of all, lessons learned, and if you really want some objective, and in a possible, constructive way, it can be done.

**UN News:** As the High Commissioner, you have come in a time when human rights are under serious attack globally. What your priorities are going to be?

**Michelle Bachelet:** I arrived, and two days later it was the Human Rights Council for two weeks, and here the third week, in New York. But, I would say, first of all, of course, my priorities are to do what my mandate tells me to do, to be the voice of the voiceless. But also to engage with governments so they respect human rights, protect people from rights violations, and promote human rights.

But, in some countries, it is not a State policy to not do the right thing, but because they do not have the capacity, so one of the tasks of my Office is to help build capacity. Many countries have asked us to support their judiciary system so it will be independent, or the police or armed forces understand the importance of respecting human rights and international laws, and also technical cooperation. We also monitor and report on issues where we receive allegations [of rights abuses and violations] from different parts.

But one of my particular priorities from the Secretary-General is prevention. I am not saying I will succeed on that, maybe not. But I will try to design a system where we can have early warning signs and try to think on early action. And of course I will work with Member States to support and engage them in the task of promoting and protecting human rights, and that sense, also with intergovernmental bodies, like the Human Rights Council, and also with other bodies, such as Treaties Bodies, Special Procedures and other rights mechanisms in the UN.
UN News: Right now, some countries do not want to cooperate with OHCHR or question the worth of the Human Rights Council. How do you plan on bringing everyone together?

Michelle Bachelet: In my opening statement, I spoke about, that consensus could be possible, that we should not lose ourselves in sterile disputes. Of course human rights is a very political thing and you see that here in the General Assembly, in the Security Council, so it is not in the Human Rights Council, by itself.

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I mean, countries have their visions, their interests, and sometimes, they are not interested in some issues. But what I have been doing is meeting, not only with the whole council, but with groups of countries in Geneva such as the Group of Latin American and Caribbean countries, the African countries, the Arab countries, the Asia-Pacific countries, the West European and Other countries, the Eastern European countries, speaking but also listening. Because, sometimes, you know what you have to do, but the way you do it can be more successful than others. Sometimes you need to speak out. Sometimes you need to
strategize in terms of saying, *look, it will work better if we do diplomatic prevention, if we start engaging the government.*

But today the world is complicated, and it is very polarized in some issues. I will do my best, and I hope I succeed. But anyway, the Human Rights Council, it is also in a process of reforming itself, they have defined that they want to be more effective and efficient, and OHCHR provides the secretariat to them. So, we will support the efforts in improving their results and outcomes, but at the end, it is a political issue, so we will work very hard, and I hope we will get important outcomes.

**UN News:** This year is the 70th anniversary of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*. What progress do you think has been done in the past 70 years?

**Michelle Bachelet:** There has been a lot of progress, but it is difficult to believe: Every time you turn on the television, you see all the awful things that are there. And that is also true, I mean, but there has been progress.

Think of 1948: how many countries allowed women to vote, for example; how many respected of freedom of speech. If you think of the different aspects of the human rights, even in more complete things that usually people do not think of as human rights, but they are human rights: on health, on education, on sanitation, on housing.

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The world today is better than 70 years ago. But having said that, there are a lot of threats, there are a lot of threats for multilateralism, there is a lot of threat and pushback on human rights. It used to be for all: universal human rights, the *three pillars:* Peace & Security, Development, and Human Rights, and we see a pushback.

We see a pushback, we see that in some documents, human rights is not mentioned, and when you ask, they say, *"it is mainstream."* And if it is mainstreamed, it is fantastic, because everybody’s doing their job. But if it is invisible, mainstream, that is not a good thing. On the other hand we see human rights defenders and civil society having their space shrink. They have been under attack. Journalists have been killed.

So there is a lot of challenges. The only thing I can say is that the struggle for human rights probably will never end, because it is a process where you advance, but there will be always people who want to push back, and that could be governments or that could be armed groups. The task of the UN is to ensure and promote the whole human rights system. And I will do what I have to do about it, but it cannot be only the task of the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, it has to be the task of the whole UN system.
UN News: I would like to ask you about protecting those who protect: human rights defenders are often targets of abuse and violence. How can they be better protected?

Michelle Bachelet: Well, the curious thing is that, as we are celebrating the 70th year of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, we are celebrating 20 years of the Declaration on the Protection of Human Rights Defenders. And in November 2017, a resolution on the protection of human rights defenders was approved unanimously by the General Assembly.

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No country voted against it. So, the issue is: on paper things can look very good, but reality is another thing. I think we have the task of making people accountable for the things they have approved. Second, to monitor implementation of those agreements that everybody has made, and engage governments, and in the cases where things are happening, holding them accountable and responsible for the killings, the torture, the detentions of many human rights defenders.
UN News: Syria has been on our radar for years and the abuses continue. What is being done to ensure that justice prevails in the long run?

Michelle Bachelet: There is a discussion now among the UN Member States because Syria, of course, wants to rebuild its country, reconstruct it. There is also a lot of discussion among the Security Council and others and donors, particularly, which circumstances will be needed to develop in the country to put money on the reconstruction.

I think there is, sort of, conversations going on, and ... we have of course said that in any process of peace, peace agreement or end of war and conflict, the international experience shows that it is more sustainable and more durable, when you have accountability processes – either transitional justice – when there is access to justice, and perpetrators are held accountable for what they have done.

But I think this is still, as you say work in progress [in Spanish] that we still cannot say this is exactly what is going to happen. But it is still a work in process.
**UN News:** You have been a very important defender of women’s rights. How is that going to continue, as the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights?

**Michelle Bachelet:** The thing is that, people tend to see OHCHR as only concerned with civil and political rights, and that is not it. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights clearly states the rights for migrants, for children, for women; right to health, to education. It is very comprehensive.

Even though I am not intending to replace any other agency, I always speak about gender issues, gender empowerment. This morning I was speaking about women who are women’s human rights defenders, who have been attacked, threatened with rape.

I will be always raising the voice for women, trying to support their capacities, and building partnership with UN Women, as we have spoken with Henrietta Fore, the head of UNICEF to see how we can create synergies. I am not going to replace any of them. I am not going to step on no one, too. That is not my attitude in life. But I do believe in partnership. I do believe we can sort of think on what thing we can do together, and we can push together.

I will be doing that, because, for me, children are very important too, women are very important, of course, everything. And climate change, also. So, I will be supporting others in their main tasks, but also be finding the ways that we can create synergies.

**UN News:** One of the most pressing issues for the entire world is climate change. How are human rights linked to the environment?

**Michelle Bachelet:** Well they are very important. First of all, because if we are not able to stop climate change, the people who will suffer most are the poorest, the women, the children, and most the vulnerable ones. They will have challenges accessing water, food or agriculture. Many of them, for example, from the small islands, they will have to leave the island if the sea level rises, they will have to go somewhere as a migrant.

There are so many concrete consequences that will be effects in people’s lives and their rights.

That is why we also believe that working strongly to combat climate change is a very essential task, including of the High Commissioner. I think also that we need to be more part of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and how we support the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). I know that not all, but the idea of advancing by 2030 and not leaving anyone behind, it means, at the end, to have human rights respected throughout the world.
And climate change is of huge importance, because I have seen places where there is no more water and people who depend agriculture, mainly women, and now have to think how they get their incomes. With climate change, we have seen, and scientists tell us ... about worsening natural disasters and extreme weather, forest fires. And all of these will have a lot of consequences for the life of people. It is very important to work very closely on that, too. I completely agree with the Secretary-General when said that this is one of the major, major challenges that we have.