

12 July 2016

**Statement by H.E. Mr. Mogens Lykketoft,
President of the 70th Session of the General Assembly,
At the opening of the High-level thematic debate – Human Rights at
the centre of the global agenda**

Her Majesty Queen Mathilde of Belgium, His Excellency Secretary-General Ban-Ki Moon, Honorable Ministers, Presidents of the International Criminal Court and the Human Rights Council, Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen.

It is my great pleasure to welcome you all to this High Level Thematic Debate on Human Rights.

It is fitting that the third such debate of my Presidency, focuses on the Pillar that should underpin everything we do in the United Nations.

Human Rights, after all, are universal.

They are indivisible and inter-dependent.

They are the standards that you and your leaders have committed to uphold so that all people can enjoy dignity, freedom and equality.

And they constitute both a legal and a moral framework that enable people everywhere to fight injustice anywhere.

In today's world, however, human rights are far from universally respected.

In the past few weeks, most recently with the horrific bloodshed in South Sudan, I have been deeply saddened by the violence and terror that robbed hundreds of innocent people of their lives and their rights.

Such events feed into a broader global context whereby the very values that underpin human rights – tolerance, equality, dignity, pluralism and liberty – are under siege.

Faith in public institutions and in politics, in the rule of law and in open and just societies, is dangerously low.

Repression of journalists, civil society actors and others who question authority is on the rise.

Feelings of alienation and marginalization are leading some towards extremism and violence.

And intolerance, xenophobia and injustice have become worryingly commonplace in many countries.

Less than one year ago, all 193 members of this Assembly adopted the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development which provided us with hope that we could counter such trends; that we could transform our world for the better.

But if today's leaders do not reignite their commitment to human rights; reject the rhetoric of division and hate; and address the drivers of today's tensions – joblessness, inequalities, climate change, and abuses of power; – then that hope will quickly give way to despair.

We must not let this happen.

We must not allow the culture of human rights that has been created these past seventy years to unravel.

In addition to the efforts of individual member states and others, we must ensure that the United Nations, 70 years after its founding, continues to be a bulwark against threats to human rights.

Informed by the various human rights anniversaries taking place this year, that is what we will focus on in this High Level Thematic Debate.

It is an opportunity to examine the UN's own shortcomings in this area; and to understand how the emphasis on human rights in the 2030 Agenda and the recent reviews on peace and security impacts upon the UN's overall approach to human rights.

To do so, we will hear directly from member states through the plenary debate this morning and all day tomorrow.

And through three thematic interactive segments, we will also hear from civil society, independent experts; private companies and others.

The first of these will look at actions and strategies to combat discrimination and inequalities as they relate to migrants and refugees; women and girls; LGBTI people; institutionalized racism and the impacts of historical injustices and global inequalities.

Second, we will look at how to strengthen the foundations for human rights – the rule of law; governance and access to justice.

In particular, we will look at ways to ensure that the legal system is accessible to all and that public institutions reach the standard set by Goal 16 and the broader 2030 Agenda.

And third, we will look at how to reverse the worrying trends that have seen governments and other actors restrict the space in which civil society operates – space that is essential for collaboration, for innovation, for participation, accountability and democracy.

Overall, Excellencies, this Debate is an opportunity to identify concrete steps that the next UN Secretary-General can take to keep human rights at the center of the global agenda, as the current Secretary-General has done during his tenure.

And this evening, from 6-9pm, you will have an opportunity to see 10 of the 12 candidates presented thus far engage in a Global Townhall – not just with the UN membership but with the global public too.

I sincerely hope that both events can ultimately help the United Nations and its member states advance on the promise of the UN Charter – to promote social progress and better standards of life in larger freedom.

Thank you.