

# The Highest Aspiration

A Call to Action  
for Human Rights

2020



United  
Nations

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# THE HIGHEST ASPIRATION

## A CALL TO ACTION FOR HUMAN RIGHTS

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by António Guterres, United Nations Secretary-General  
on the occasion of the seventy-fifth anniversary of the United Nations

“Whereas disregard and contempt for human rights have resulted in barbarous acts which have outraged the conscience of mankind, and the advent of a world in which human beings shall enjoy freedom of speech and belief and freedom from fear and want has been proclaimed as the highest aspiration of the common people”

– Preamble, The Universal Declaration of Human Rights

**Seventy-five years ago, the United Nations Charter captured the determination of a generation that had suffered global war and depression never again to allow such conditions of human misery to prevail. It reaffirmed “faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person, in the equal rights of men and women”. A few years later, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights defined those rights more fully. The Declaration was a promise by leaders from every region that they would never relent in their pursuit of fundamental rights and freedoms. They understood that this would not be an easy task.**

Over the ensuing decades, massive gains have been made in human rights. Billions of people live safer, longer, more dignified lives. We have

covenants spelling out the full range of civil, political, social, economic and cultural rights; a robust treaty-based system; an institutional architecture for the promotion and protection of human rights and greater awareness of the values and commitments underpinning them. The result, writ large, is a common vision of what makes us human: a set of rights that are at once universal and indivisible, that balance the individual and the collective, and that inspire us in our pursuit of a better world for all, including future generations.

Yet the cause of human rights faces major challenges, and no country is immune. Disregard for human rights is widespread. In many situations around the world, we see egregious and systematic human rights violations; rampant impunity; rising hate speech, misogyny, exclusion and discrimination; social polarization and loss of civility;

environmental degradation, and unequal access to resources and opportunity. We also see the human rights agenda being instrumentalized for political purposes. Meanwhile, megatrends such as the climate crisis, population growth and rapid urbanization are changing our lives. People are being left behind. They are afraid. Leaders are too often turning one against another for political gain. Trust between people and some of their leaders has eroded. At the same time, we live in a world of unprecedented opportunity. Extraordinary technological progress and global economic developments have lifted millions out of poverty, and we have an agreed framework of action for the way forward in the form of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

At such a critical juncture, our shared human condition and values must be a source of unity, not division. We must give people hope and a vision of what the future can hold. The human rights system helps us to meet the challenges, opportunities and needs of the 21st century; to reconstruct relations between people and leaders; and to achieve the global stability, solidarity, pluralism and inclusion on which we all depend. It points to the ways in which we can transform hope into concrete action with real impact on people's lives. It must never be a pretext for power or politics; it is above both.

Upholding all rights of all people is in the interests of everyone. Crucially, we cannot pick and choose which rights; the pursuit of all rights is essential to the attainment of any. It would be a mistake to diminish economic, social and cultural rights, as is often done. But it would be equally misguided to think that those rights are sufficient to answer people's yearning for freedom. We need a Call to Action that encompasses the full range of rights.

On my first day as Secretary-General, I vowed to make human dignity the core of our work. Concretely, this means realizing the promise of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights through everything we do. It means reinvigorating

our pursuit of those enduring rights and values in the context of new challenges and opportunities.

My goal for the United Nations – as it marks its seventy-fifth anniversary – is to promote a human rights vision that is transformative, that provides solutions and that speaks directly to each and every human being. To that end, we must broaden the base of support for human rights by reaching out to critics and engaging in conversations that reach deeply into society.

The Universal Declaration and the human rights instruments that followed from it articulate a social contract between all human beings by which everyone can live to their fullest potential. Today we need to renew that bond. While we must continue the quest to attain all civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights, several areas warrant extra effort, either because the opportunity exists to make significant advances in the realization of human rights, or the needs are so acute and trends so problematic that a greater effort is required. Some of these represent a reaffirmation of ongoing work, while in other areas we must do far more.

This Call to Action sets out some overarching guiding principles and identifies seven such domains: (1) rights at the core of sustainable development; (2) rights in times of crisis; (3) gender equality and equal rights for women; (4) public participation and civic space; (5) rights of future generations, especially climate justice; (6) rights at the heart of collective action; and (7) new frontiers of human rights. In each of these areas, there are specific steps we can take together in the near term to advance the human rights agenda.

I am determined to put the full weight of my office and the United Nations family behind the Call to Action we launch today, strongly supporting the vital work of the High Commissioner for Human Rights. We will also ensure close cooperation

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## GUIDING PRINCIPLES

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- Human rights are universal and indivisible. We must see human rights with a vision that speaks to each and every human being and encompasses all rights: economic; social; cultural; civil and political.
- Our efforts must be characterized by the highest standards of integrity, impartiality and independence, based on evidence and norms, and guided by the voices of those whose rights are affected.
- Our purpose is, above all, to have a positive impact. This means being open to all available channels and opportunities to engage. There is a place for negotiations behind the scenes, a place for building and strengthening national capacities, a place for supporting different stakeholders, and a time when speaking out is essential.
- Human rights and human dignity will never be realized without a special emphasis on the human rights of women. Realizing gender equality underpins every element of this Call to Action.
- Human diversity is an asset, not a threat. We must appreciate the richness of our differences while never losing sight of our common humanity and dignity. Every community, including minorities and indigenous peoples, must feel that its identity is respected and that it can fully participate in society as a whole. Every individual is entitled to enjoy human rights without discrimination on any basis, even as we also recognize that age, gender and diversity shape their experiences and must be taken into account in our responses.
- Climate change is the biggest threat to our survival as a species and is already threatening human rights around the world. Addressing it must remain among our top priorities.
- Human rights and human dignity are critical to defining governance and ethics for the future, including inter-generational justice.
- Human rights are the glue that binds us but only if we commit to meaningful dialogue, including with those who question or disagree, and to more effective communication about the positive impact, making a stronger case for each and every right, as well as for the universality and inherent interdependence of all human rights.
- Realizing human rights is anchored in national ownership yet linked globally. It requires broad and sustained engagement with states, civil society and other stakeholders, and is intrinsically linked to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.
- Within the United Nations, human rights must be fully considered in all decision-making, operations and institutional commitments.
- Our overall intention is to strengthen UN leadership in advancing the cause of human rights, to make the human rights system responsive and innovative in confronting human rights challenges, and to enhance synergies between human rights and all pillars of the work of the United Nations.

between my office and the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights in follow up to the Call to Action. It is important to underline that human rights are the responsibility of each and every United Nations actor and that a culture of human rights must permeate everything we do, in the field, at regional level and at Headquarters. I look in particular to our leaders in

the field, including Heads of Mission and Resident Coordinators, to play their part.

I also look forward to working with all Governments and partners to bring this Call to Action to life and thereby help all people, in all countries, achieve, in the words of the Universal Declaration, this “highest aspiration” of all humankind.

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## RIGHTS AT THE CORE OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

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**When we take a human rights-based approach to development, the outcomes are more sustainable, powerful and effective. This is why human rights permeate the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The 17 Sustainable Development Goals [SDGs] are underpinned by economic, civil, cultural, political and social rights, as well as the right to development.**

In their universality and indivisibility, as well as their strong emphasis on equality and inclusion, these Goals echo the spirit as well as the letter of our human rights commitments. They not only imagine a world in which the material conditions exist for people to attain their rights but also a world in which people are empowered to participate actively in decisions that affect them. Moreover, when everyone has equal access to opportunity and choice, and can claim their human rights, no one is left behind. This promise obliges us to address inequality in all its dimensions and eliminate all forms of discrimination. Nobody’s prospects should be less because of age, gender, or diversity, because of what they look like, where they live, or how they worship, because of their sexual orientation or gender

identity. We must understand and pay special attention to the specific needs and experiences of young people, people living with disabilities, minorities, indigenous communities, refugees, migrants and other groups facing specific challenges. Moreover, special emphasis needs to be given to those goals that shape people’s lives and future, such as the quest to eradicate poverty, provide education for all, in particular for girls, to provide universal healthcare and to ensure the rule of law.

With the adoption of the 2030 Agenda, we have an agreed roadmap, fresh impetus and new tools to eradicate poverty and to improve the quality of people’s lives, including through the exercise of the full range of rights. The Agenda’s goals and targets correspond overwhelmingly to existing human rights commitments. This means that, in addition to the political commitment made in 2015, we have human rights underpinnings on which to fall back, many already enshrined in national legislation and covered by national human rights institutions. To ensure that we leave no one behind, as we embark on the Decade of Action for the delivery of the Sustainable Development Goals, we will:

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## ACTIONS

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- Support Member States to ensure that human rights principles inform implementation of the 2030 Agenda, including empowering people and creating avenues for civil society participation, as well as taking human rights-sensitive, non-discriminatory approaches to data collection, monitoring, and reporting. This is the surest way to bring the benefits of the ambitious and far-reaching agenda to all, leaving no one behind.
- Encourage the full use of human rights mechanisms, including the Universal Periodic Review, the human rights treaty bodies and the special procedures, as well as national human rights institutions to contribute to SDG implementation, particularly at the national and local levels.
- Support Member States and other stakeholders in making better use of the Universal Periodic Review outcomes, as well as of reports of the treaty bodies in national development planning, and in follow-up and reporting, including on the SDGs and in the preparation and consideration of voluntary national reviews at the high-level political forum on sustainable development.
- Continue our efforts to help design policies that support the most vulnerable and/or excluded groups, recognizing and responding to multiple and intersecting deprivations and sources of discrimination that limit opportunities and make it harder to escape poverty, live with dignity and enjoy human rights on a healthy planet.

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# RIGHTS IN TIMES OF CRISIS

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**From its origins, the United Nations has been called upon to protect populations from different threats, both in times of war and times of peace. The best form of protection is to avert such threats in the first place.**

I have made prevention a top priority and a common thread across the work of the Organization, both in my reform efforts and key decision-making and programming. Human rights considerations are central to these efforts. Indeed, there is no better guarantee of prevention than for Member States to meet their human rights responsibilities.

There is a well-documented correlation between a society's enjoyment of and commitment to human rights – including non-discrimination – and its resilience to crisis. I see prevention as the shared responsibility of all United Nations actors, supporting Member States, including through our internal prevention platform.

When crises occur, individuals and communities need to be protected. International humanitarian law and human rights law must be respected. Ever more complex conflicts raise the spectre of atrocity crimes, requiring extra

vigilance. They displace unprecedented numbers of people both internally and as refugees. We have many concepts of and mandates for protection, including under international human rights, refugee and international humanitarian law. We need to expand and build on what already exists. A common approach begins with a culture that is people-centred, and especially conscious of the specific needs of women and girls. Minorities and indigenous peoples must

be protected and treated as equals in their societies, while recognizing the right of all peoples to be different. A common agenda for protection must deliver concrete services to those most often excluded, to the most vulnerable and those with specific needs. Our focus must be on preserving human dignity, preventing human rights violations and responding promptly and effectively when such violations occur. To that end, we will:

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## ACTIONS

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- Continue to engage with the Security Council and creatively use the full spectrum of other tools and channels, including leverage with others, to raise awareness, prevent crisis and protect people effectively.
- Develop an agenda for protection for the United Nations system, underpinned by a common understanding of the centrality of protection in our actions. This agenda must take account of the different experiences and protection needs arising from differences in age, gender and diversity. It must further focus on the protection of minorities against any form of discrimination and on the protection of the rights of indigenous peoples.
- Continue to enhance our organizational culture, building upon existing initiatives – including Human Rights Up Front and follow-up to the Rosenthal report – which emphasize prevention, protection and human rights in our awareness, decision-making and programming at field, regional and Headquarters levels.
- In UN mission and non-mission settings, ensure that mandate implementation and/or engagement by Resident Coordinators and UN Country Teams are informed by a human rights risk and opportunity analysis, including gender specific analysis. In missions that do not have a human rights component, ensure that the Special Representatives of the Secretary-General are provided with the necessary capacity and expertise on human rights. Expand, as necessary, the presence of Human Rights Advisers to UN Country Teams.

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# GENDER EQUALITY AND EQUAL RIGHTS FOR WOMEN

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**There is no such thing as human rights for all while half the global population is subject to the levels of violence, misogyny, exclusion, entrenched inequalities, economic disempowerment, and multiple forms of discrimination that many women and girls face every day.**

Violence against women and girls is one of the most pervasive human rights violations globally. Women should have the same prospects and opportunities as men. And yet no country in the world has attained full gender equality. Globally, we are witnessing a pushback against the realization of human rights of women, alarming levels of femicide, attacks on women human rights defenders, as well as laws and policies that discriminate. Misogyny is a common feature of violent extremism. Persistent gaps and stagnation are

clear in women's participation in political leadership roles, peace and security and economic empowerment. This regression in the realization of the human rights of women is fundamentally political. It is about power. The promotion and protection of human rights of women in all spheres of work must be understood as foundational to the values and goals of the UN, not as a simple add-on to existing efforts. For too long, policies and laws have been shaped largely through the experiences of one half of humanity. This has affected not just the rights of individuals, but ultimately the very way in which we have constructed institutions, framed problems, and sought global solutions. Rectifying this requires a shift in thinking, so that we consciously build socio-economic, governance and security systems that work for all. The work starts within. To that end, we will:

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## ACTIONS

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- Engage with and support Member States on policies and legislation that promote gender equality and equal rights for women, including, in particular, repealing discriminatory laws and enacting positive laws, eliminating violence against women and girls in all spheres, ensuring sexual and reproductive health and rights, and striving for women's equal representation and participation in all spheres.
- Ensure that the agenda for protection proposed in section two of this Call to Action addresses systemic and inter-related discrimination against women; creates adequate protection approaches for women human rights defenders; and strives to eliminate violence against women in all spheres.
- Apply a gender lens to everything the United Nations does, including our engagement with Member States and our internal decision-making. The purpose of such a lens is to make visible elements for analysis that are often overlooked. For example: what are the gendered power



relations? Have we included and consulted with women? Are women in leadership roles? How will this action affect men and women differently, notably in legislation and its implementation? Does the action rely on or instead inadvertently exploit gendered stereotypes? Based on this analysis, design response and engagement strategies both at Headquarters and field levels.

- Building on our prevention efforts, ensure that conflict analysis and ensuing policy and operational responses integrate gender analysis and prioritize the full and meaningful participation of women in all areas of prevention and resolution, including in formal peace processes.
- Ensure that risk analysis and early warning methodology pay particular attention to incitement to all forms of violence against women, including through cyber- and electronic means, as well as analysis of shifts in the realization and protection of the human rights of women.
- Consult regularly with diverse women's human rights organizations to discuss trends, challenges and potential solutions at field level, including in the context of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

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## PUBLIC PARTICIPATION AND CIVIC SPACE

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**Society is stronger and more resilient when women and men can play a meaningful role in political, economic and social life, contributing to policy-making that affects their lives, including by accessing information, engaging in dialogue, expressing dissent and joining together to express their views. This includes the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion.**

But in too many places, an open space for this participation is shrinking. Repressive laws are spreading, with increased restrictions on freedoms to express, participate, assemble and associate. Journalists and human rights defenders, especially women, are increasingly threatened. New technologies have helped civil society networks to grow, but they have also given authorities excuses to control civil society movements and curtail

media freedoms, often under security pretexts. This shrinking of civic space is frequently a prelude to a more general deterioration in human rights. These trends require policy consistency across the United Nations system. The UN depends on the active engagement of civil society actors. They are critical to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals and addressing climate change. We must actively counter narratives that seek to discredit and undermine civil society. Where parts of civil society are considered a threat, we need a principled mindset and to engage constructively. Where civil society actors form an indispensable part of the landscape of collective action, we must design and implement our programmes with broad participation in mind. To that end, in addition to my recent *Plans of Action on Hate Speech and to Safeguard Religious Sites*, we will:

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## ACTIONS

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- On the occasion of the 75th anniversary of the United Nations and building on positive participation by civil society in climate negotiations and the Sustainable Development Goals, launch a dialogue on more systematic participation of civil society in United Nations bodies and agencies, with special attention to women's rights organizations and young people.
- Design a system-wide strategy on civic space and adequate guidance to UN leaders in the field along with mechanisms to: (i) positively engage with interlocutors to promote and protect civic space; (ii) respond to undue restrictions on civic space; and, (iii) protect the space for different stakeholders to express their views.
- Review and strengthen United Nations tools that aim to empower civil society, protect civic space and encourage participation by all groups in democratic processes.
- Ensure that Resident Coordinators, UN Country Teams and heads of United Nations peace operations develop partnerships with civil society organizations to contribute to an enabling environment for civic space, including for women's organizations and women's rights defenders.
- Increase UN support at field level for the promotion of laws and policies that protect the right to equal participation and civic space, including a free and independent media – a foundation of open, democratic societies and most critical at a time when citizens demand accountability.

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# RIGHTS OF FUTURE GENERATIONS, ESPECIALLY CLIMATE JUSTICE

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**The promises made in the UN Charter and the Universal Declaration were explicitly to future as well as current generations. And yet we risk breaking those promises. The climate emergency threatens the rights and dignity not only of millions of people worldwide but also of people not yet born. It threatens the very survival of some Member States, especially small island developing countries.**

Our children and grandchildren will enjoy far fewer of their fundamental rights, individually and collectively, if we do not act. And they are already speaking to us through the young people of today. They are asking, indeed demanding, today's decision-makers to come up with concrete commitments, solutions, and real action. The window of opportunity to act is closing rapidly. Action must be at all levels and by all actors in society. States must take urgent steps to reduce environmental

degradation and protect those who raise their voices to press for such action. Parliaments have a special duty to oversee executive action on this existential issue, to adopt legislation to protect the environment and to implement the Paris Agreement on Climate Change. As illustrated by a number of recent landmark decisions, judiciaries

are increasingly called upon to promote a safe, clean, healthy and sustainable environment. The private sector must take far more steps to limit the negative impact of their activities on the environment. Finally, we must create space for the younger generation to participate in shaping their own future. Building on my recent Climate Summit, we will:

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## ACTIONS

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- In the context of including civil society voices in UN bodies and agencies, create space for young people to participate in shaping the decisions that will affect their future, including but not limited to climate change.
- Consider ways of more fully involving a wider array of stakeholders in policy processes concerning climate action; this could include, for example, providing opportunities for cities to participate and considering how to take account of future generations in decision-making.
- Increase United Nations support to Member States at field level for laws and policies that regulate and promote the right to a safe, clean, healthy and sustainable environment, and for effective individual access to justice and effective remedies for environment-related concerns.
- Further strengthen the UN's partnership with the business sector to ensure that self-regulatory practices related to the protection of the environment and measures to address climate change are adopted and applied, in the context of wider regulatory frameworks.
- Increase United Nations support to Member States at field level for the development of protection mechanisms for human rights defenders and environmental activists, particularly young people, women and girls.
- Advocate for children and young people to receive an education that prepares them for the future they face and, in this connection, for the development of climate change related curricula at all levels of primary and secondary education.

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# HUMAN RIGHTS AT THE HEART OF COLLECTIVE ACTION

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**We face a terrible paradox. Global challenges are more connected than ever, but our responses are more fragmented. Indeed, we have seen the emergence of multiple rifts - between powerful Member States, between people and some of their leaders, in our human solidarity with each other, between people and planet, and in the deepening inequalities around technology.**

And yet, collective action is the only answer for the multiple crises that humanity is facing. And it must be truly collective – no longer the domain of States and international organizations alone but of the many civil society and private sector actors who have a role to play in solutions to our shared problems. Stronger multilateralism must be more inclusive, more networked and place human rights at its very centre. Our human rights institutions must stand at the very heart of this coming together, just as the human rights commitments we have already made represent a beacon of hope in our complex world. The Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights is central to all elements of this Call to Action but we all share responsibility for advancing a culture of respect for the full spectrum of human rights.

As the world's only universal body to address security, development, humanitarian and human rights issues, the United Nations bears a special responsibility. I have committed, as Secretary-General, to do our utmost to step up to the challenge. We will seize every opportunity to engage with different stakeholders, particularly Member States, on human rights and humanitarian concerns, including enhanced support to national human rights institutions. It also means continued engagement with the Security Council, the General Assembly, and the Human Rights Council, as well as bilaterally and at the regional level to resolve human rights and humanitarian challenges. We will continue to provide timely information on current and emerging human rights crises. A critical component of this effort is to strengthen and take maximum advantage of the important tools that we have in the international and regional human rights systems, as well as existing national and international accountability mechanisms. We will also continue to work with other international, regional and national entities, as well as with civil society organizations and private sector to address human rights concerns. To that end, we will:

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## ACTIONS

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- In the face of persistent disregard for human rights, take every opportunity to communicate the importance of international law and principles and make a concerted effort to ensure predictable and consistent UN responses thereto, including accountability mechanisms.
- Increase our support to Member States, including through enhanced capacity-building efforts to national and regional human rights institutions and mechanisms.
- Ensure that the UN makes fuller use of its human rights tools and entry points, including the Universal Periodic Review (UPR), as a basis for meeting the challenges, opportunities, and needs of the 21st century and for implementation of the 2030 Agenda.
- Regularly provide human rights analysis and information to the Security Council and the General Assembly on current and potential human rights and humanitarian crises.
- Develop a funding strategy to provide financial stability for the international human rights system, including the human rights treaty bodies.
- Issue practical guidance to ensure that UPR recommendations are taken into consideration in UN engagement with all Member States at Headquarters and field levels.

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# NEW FRONTIERS OF HUMAN RIGHTS

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**The digital age has opened up new frontiers of human welfare, knowledge and exploration. Digital technologies provide new means to advocate for, defend and exercise our rights. Advances in medicine and science hold enormous promise for prolonging and improving our lives.**

And while we continue to advocate that human rights apply online, new technologies are too often used to violate rights, especially of people who are already vulnerable or being left behind, for instance through surveillance, repression, censorship, online harassment – especially of human rights defenders – and potentially diminished

social protection as a result of the digitization of welfare systems. Advances in technologies, such as facial recognition software, robotics, digital identification and biotechnology, must not be used to erode human rights, deepen inequality or exacerbate existing discrimination. Artificial intelligence [AI] is a tool that can amplify the impact of each of these technologies and that is increasingly applied to life-critical areas such as medicine. Its governance needs to ensure fairness, accountability, explainability and transparency. In the security sphere, we must ensure that autonomous machines are never given lethal capacity outside human judgment or control. I continue to call for a global prohibition on lethal autonomous weapon systems.

While the application of human rights online and in life sciences can never be in question, we owe ourselves and future generations a frank discussion about the challenges and opportunities of protecting and advancing human rights, human dignity and human agency in the digital age. The independent High-level Panel on Digital Cooperation has pointed the way, highlighting

some critical questions that arise. It calls for universal internet connectivity, digital capacity building and mechanisms to improve digital trust and security.

The aim is a world in which everyone benefits from these profound advances and new frontiers. To that end, we will:

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## ACTIONS

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- Advocate for the application of the human rights framework to the digital space, based on the recommendations of the High-level Panel on Digital Cooperation.
- Promote effective data protection and the right to privacy, particularly where personal and health-related data are concerned.
- Work with business to apply the 2011 UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights, and specifically with social media companies to understand and respond to concerns about existing or potential human rights violations, including by working with civil society and human rights defenders to prevent or quickly redress such violations.
- Continue to advocate for a ban on lethal autonomous weapon systems.
- Develop a roadmap for implementation of the recommendations of the High-level Panel on Digital Cooperation, including for the purpose of embedding human rights values and considerations in an improved global digital cooperation architecture.