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I am honoured to introduce this special “Vienna + 20” edition of the Human Rights Monitor Quarterly, reflecting on the Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action, its achievements to date and the challenges that remain.

Twenty years ago the global community declared that the “promotion and protection of human rights is a matter of priority for the international community” and must be “the first responsibility of governments”.

The Second World Conference on Human Rights was said to afford a “unique opportunity” to review the “international human rights system and machinery” and to thereby “enhance and promote a fuller observance of those rights”.

In the lead up to that Conference, the International Service for Human Rights produced a special edition of the Human Rights Monitor. It was designed to ensure that conference participants – both government and NGO representatives – “seize the day to take a truly meaningful step toward improving the protection of every human right, for individuals, groups and peoples”.

Two decades on from the adoption of the Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action, this special edition of the Human Rights Monitor Quarterly offers a timely reflection on the steps that were taken...and the steps that still remain. It brings together insights from some of the world’s leading human rights experts and advocates, many of whom attended the conference some twenty years ago.

It is “easy to be cynical” about grandiose declarations, as ISHR Board member Chris Sidoti writes in his piece. Despite this, he says, it seems clear that the Vienna Conference contributed to a number of “significant developments in human rights law and practice”. Perhaps most famously, these developments include the establishment of the post of UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, as Mary Robinson, former President of Ireland and of the International Commission of Jurists, reflects in her article.

The Vienna Conference also helped to strengthen domestic mechanisms for the promotion of protection of human rights. The conference precipitated the establishment of many national human rights institutions, as Chair of the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission Sima Samar writes in her piece, and led to the elaboration of National Human Rights Action Plans, as former diplomat Bill Barker explains in his. Having worked for most of my professional career with grassroots and national NGOs, I have seen the modest but important role that both NHRIs and NHRAPs can play in contributing to the domestic implementation of international human rights obligations.

As well as contributing to a strengthening of international and domestic human rights machinery, the Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action also contributed to the normative development of human rights; affirming the universality and indivisibility of human rights, the crucial interdependence of human rights and development, and the equal and inalienable rights of women and girls.

As a number of the contributors reflect, however, we must remain constantly alert to ensure adherence to these norms. My own experience working as a human rights lawyer and advocate for over 15 years has taught me that we human rights defenders may have history on our side, but progress in the achievement of human rights is never inevitable and the

prevention of regress requires, to borrow Thomas Jefferson's words, our eternal vigilance.

In this vein, forthcoming sessions of the Human Rights Council will present an opportunity for, but also a test of, the international community's commitment to the VDPA norms.

Consistent with the rights to equality and non-discrimination, first set out in the UDHR but strongly reaffirmed in the VDPA, it is crucial that the Council and all Member States explicitly acknowledge and take legislative and other action to prohibit all forms of discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation or gender identity, as leading LGBT rights advocate John Fisher reflects in his piece.

Consistent with the principles of universality and indivisibility, the Council and all Member States should also take action to ensure that human rights – particularly women's rights and LGBT rights – are not restricted in the name of protecting so-called "traditional values". The notion of "traditional values" is completely illegitimate so far as it is invoked to restrict the enjoyment of rights guaranteed under international human rights law or standards, or to criminalise or impede activities in defense of them.

The Council's consideration of country situations such as those in Syria and Sri Lanka will similarly test whether the Vienna Declaration really did "change the perception of the rule concerning non-interference in the internal affairs of states", as Vienna Conference participant and former Amnesty International delegate Andrew Clapham argues in his piece. Will the assertion that the "promotion and protection of human rights is a matter of priority for the international community" remain rhetoric or become reality?

For almost three decades, ISHR has played a leading role – together with partners such as Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch and the ICJ – in ensuring that the voices and interests of human rights defenders are heard and represented at the UN. The Vienna Conference twenty years ago was no exception. As the 1993 special edition of the Human Rights Monitor records, "hundreds of NGOs" played a "significant" role both in the lead up to and during the course of the Vienna Conference. This is reflected in Article 38 of the Vienna Declaration itself, which explicitly recognises the "important role of non-governmental organizations in the promotion of all human rights and in humanitarian activities at national, regional and international levels." ISHR's current work to enhance the effectiveness and accessibility of the UN human rights treaty body system – including by making it more accessible to human rights defenders and more effective in protecting human rights on the ground – continues this tradition. So to our work to ensure that processes for NGO accreditation at the UN are fair and transparent.

Despite the recognition some twenty years ago of the legitimate and crucial role of NGOs in protecting human rights

– and the further provision in Article 38 that NGOs "involved in the field of human rights should enjoy the rights and freedoms recognized in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and the protection of the national law", the piece by pan-African human rights defender Sheila Keetharuth somberly reminds us that "many human rights defenders across the globe pay a heavy price, sometimes with their lives, for doing their work." ISHR's longstanding focus on supporting human rights defenders and on strengthening laws and mechanisms to prevent and redress reprisals reflects and responds to this sober reality.

As this 2013 special edition of the Human Rights Monitor Quarterly reveals, the Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action unarguably made a positive contribution both to the normative recognition and the institutional protection of human rights. As it also reveals, however, ISHR's mission to strengthen systems which protect human rights and to support people who defend human rights has never been more salient or important.

I am really excited to be joining the ISHR team and look forward to working with you – our many friends, partners and supporters – to make the promise of the Vienna Declaration a reality.

*Phil Lynch* took up the post of Director of the International Service for Human Rights in January 2013. He previously worked as Director of the Human Rights Law Centre in Australia (2006-2012) and the Manager of the Homeless Persons' Legal Clinic (2001-2005). You can follow him on Twitter: @PhilALynch. ■