

Opening Statement by UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet at the 40th session of the Human Rights Council

25 February 2019

President of the General Assembly,
Secretary-General,
President of the Human Rights Council,
Excellencies, Heads of State and Government,
Ministers,
Colleagues, Friends,

I am honoured to address this High Level Segment of the Human Rights Council. The impressively high number of national, regional and international dignitaries among us today speaks to the importance and relevance of the Council's deliberations.

In my service as a Head of State and Head of Government I learned many things, but there are two lessons that I would like to share with you this morning.

One was very simple: there was rarely a serious gap between the interest of humanity, and the national interest of my country.

Is this because of Chile's long coast and exposure to many strong outside forces? Or is it really much more simple, and common to every region?

If a policy seems in the short term to advance a narrow interest, but hurts the future of humanity, that policy is surely counter-productive.

Today, we sometimes hear human rights being dismissed as supposedly "globalist" – as opposed to the patriotic interest of a sovereign government. But how can any State's interests be advanced by policies that damage the well-being of all humans?

This is true of climate change. You may know the saying: if you think economic interests are more important than the environment, try counting your money while holding your breath.

It is true of war: the devastation of today's conflicts, and their huge economic and humanitarian cost, create broad and enduring harm.

It is true of discrimination, which holds back all of society. And it is true of inequalities, which are at the heart of our struggle to protect and promote human rights.

These challenges can be addressed. And this is the second lesson I want to share with you this morning. In my capacity as a Head of State; as a government Minister, a member of

non-governmental organisations; and a refugee myself, I saw many human rights measures being debated, enacted, updated and upheld.

And I watched these measures work.

Human rights-based policies are effective. They deliver better outcomes for people – people across the social and economic spectrum, and beyond borders. They prevent grievances, conflicts, inequalities, and suffering and discrimination of all kinds.

Policies that build social justice also help to develop stronger economies.

They drive more inclusive political systems, better frameworks for education, health-care, and other basic services.

They build confidence and social harmony. They deepen trust. They build hope.

Steps to ensure the authorities engage in respectful dialogue with civil society make for much better, broader development – and I want to emphasise this point: there cannot be optimal, sustainable or inclusive development when the voices of civil society are absent.

Policies which support the rights of every woman and man to make their own choices help drive the 2030 Agenda; they are good for communities and nations.

Systems that deliver justice and redress for victims mean that grievances are recognised, and make it easier to build or rebuild security and peace.

Mr President,

The universal appeal of human rights standards stems from their roots in many cultures and traditions. These norms and standards have proven their value in preventing calamity: they construct safety, resilience, fairness, social cohesion and peace.

This is the logic of my Office, this Council and its experts – and indeed the United Nations as a whole.

No country has a perfect human rights record, but all acknowledge that their people have rights, which the Government must uphold and protect.

I am convinced States can meet these expectations, and I will continue my close engagement with Member States – to understand their approach and context, and assist them in fulfilling their responsibilities.

Where leaders have the foresight to see the advantages of human rights-based policies, and the political will to advance them, we will be eager to bring practical assistance. Our technical cooperation programmes and policy guidance – which benefit from careful human rights monitoring and analysis – will have powerful effect.

I know that in today's political landscape, the will is not always there. In some countries, important human rights advances are being dismantled – for example, on the rights of women, of minorities and of indigenous peoples.

Other States drag their feet on issues such as climate change, where action today can preserve the future for the children of our countries. This harms us all.

Like many of you, in recent weeks I have watched children marching for sound climate policies and other measures. As a parent, a grandparent, and quite simply as a human being, they inspire in me a fierce determination to continue our struggle to uphold their rights.

We cannot give in to defeatism and watch passively as the structures, which maintain peace and security, and sound development, crumble.

We have the opportunity. This generation of world leaders has the capacity to ensure far greater well-being for their people. The tools exist.

In today's currents, in this uncharted storm of heavy winds and rising seas, careless leadership could carry our countries into catastrophe.

Or we can use fundamental principles to steer our vessels to safety in more peaceful waters.

Every day, we deal with many challenges across the planet. The world's eyes have been on Venezuela, especially in the last few days. Just yesterday my Office issued a statement regarding the situation: we hope violence will end, and that respect for human rights will be part of the solution.

Excellencies,

This Council, the Treaty Bodies and my Office, including its 72 field presences around the world, are honoured with the mandate to stand up for human rights.

I want to emphasise my admiration for the Council's record in effecting early warning, and in naming experts to issue detailed guidance. The Special Procedures and Universal Periodic Review have become essential human rights tools. We need now to ensure not just early warning, but early action to prevent conflict and human rights violations.

I also take this opportunity to emphasise the importance of the Treaty Bodies, whose recommendations are often profoundly relevant. Mindful of the need to avoid overburdening States with numerous and overlapping recommendations, we will continue working to help decision-makers devise appropriate policy responses.

My Office is sustained by the United Nations principles of impartiality, independence and integrity, and I view it as an essential springboard for the well-being and freedom of women and men across the world.

We will continue to engage with States and forge partnerships with UN agencies, regional and global bodies, business and other stakeholders. We will do our best to strengthen all

the international human rights institutions with a sense of common purpose, and coordinated action.

And we will continue to amplify the needs and demands of civil society, to advance the principles of dignity, equality and justice.

I thank you Mr President.