

Human Rights Day 10 December 2019

Statement by UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet

GENEVA (9 December 2019) – This has been a year of tremendous activism – notably by young people. It is particularly fitting that this year we mark Human Rights Day during the crucial UN conference in Madrid to uphold climate justice. We owe a debt of gratitude to all those millions of children, teenagers and young adults who have been standing up and speaking out more and more loudly about the crisis facing our planet. Rightly, these young people are pointing out that it is their future which is at stake, and the future of all those who have not yet even been born. It is they who will have to bear the full consequences of the actions, or lack of action, by the older generations who currently run governments and businesses, the decision-makers on whom the future of individual countries, regions and the planet as whole depends.

It cannot, of course, be left to young people alone to tackle the climate emergency, or indeed the many other human rights crises that are currently causing simultaneous turbulence in so many countries across the world. All of us must stand together, in solidarity, and act with principle and urgency.

We can, and must, uphold the painstakingly developed universal human rights principles that sustain peace, justice and sustainable development. A world with diminished human rights is a world that is stepping backwards into a darker past, when the powerful could prey on the powerless with little or no moral or legal restraint.

However, among the many human rights challenges that have been metastasizing during the first two decades of the 21st century, the global climate emergency presents perhaps the most profound planet-wide threat to human rights that we have seen since World War II. From the right to life, to health, to food, water and shelter, to our rights to be free of discrimination, to development and to self-determination, its impacts are already making themselves felt.

We have a duty to ensure young people's voices are heard. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, adopted by the UN General Assembly on 10 December 1948, was a firm commitment by States to protect the rights of *everyone* – and that includes making it possible for future generations to uphold human dignity, equality and rights.

All human beings have a right to participate in decisions that have impact on their lives. In order to ensure more effective decision-making, and to build greater trust and harmony across their nations, the leaders of every society should be listening to their people – and acting in accordance with their needs and demands.

Nothing summarizes these aims, the leitmotif of the international human rights system, more clearly and succinctly than Article 1 of the Universal Declaration, which states boldly and unequivocally that *“All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood.”*

No country, no community, will be spared by the climate emergency, as it intensifies. Already, we are seeing the most vulnerable communities and nations suffering terrible damage. People are losing homes, livelihoods – and lives. Inequalities are deepening, and more people are being forced into displacement. We must act quickly, and with principle, to ensure the least possible harm is done to human beings, and to our environment.

Climate harms will not be halted by national borders – and reactions based on hostile nationalism, or short-term financial considerations, will not only fail: they will tear our world apart. The struggles for climate justice and human rights are not a political quarrel. This is not about left or right: it is about rights – and wrongs.

It is not just concerns about the accelerating climate crisis that have driven millions to stand up and demand action. In every region, people are finding their voice to speak up about inequalities and repressive institutions. I am inspired by the courage, clarity and principle of all these people, some of them very young indeed, who are standing up peacefully, in order to right the wrongs of our era and create greater freedom and justice. They are the living expression of human rights.

Policy-makers everywhere need to listen to these calls. And in response, they need to shape more effective, and more principled, policies.

We have a right to live free from discrimination on any grounds. We have a right to access education, health-care, economic opportunities and a decent standard of living. We – all of us – have a right to participate in decisions that affect our lives. This is about our future, our livelihoods, our freedoms, our security and our environment. And not just our future, but the future of our children, grand-children and great grand-children.

We need to mobilise across the world – peacefully and powerfully – to advance a world of rights, dignity and choice for everyone. The decision-makers understood that vision very clearly in 1948. Do they understand it now? I urge world leaders to show true leadership and long-term vision and set aside narrow national political interests for the sake of everyone, including themselves and all their descendants.

ENDS

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The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) was adopted by the UN General Assembly at the Palais de Chaillot in Paris three years after the end of World War II. It was the product of 18 months' work by a drafting committee, with members and advisers from all across the world.

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