



Side-Event “Ensuring Human Rights in the Face of Current Global Challenges”

*Mittwoch, 12. Juli 2023, 14-15h, Palais des Nations, Genf*

### ***Opening Remarks by Ambassador Franz Perrez***

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen, dear colleagues

Good afternoon,

Welcome to this special event commemorating the 75th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Vienna Declaration and Program of Action. I am honored to open today’s event. It is the first time for me in Geneva in my new capacity as the new director of the Directorate of International Law at the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs.

The idea of universal human rights has undertaken a remarkable journey over the last eight decades since the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948. This Declaration was adopted only 3 years after the greatest tragedy of humankind. The Declaration provides a universal answer to the crimes committed during the Holocaust and in all other contexts when individual dignity is sacrificed based on an individual’s political or other opinion, its race, color, sex or gender identity, language, religion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status.

But human rights not only come into play in relation to large-scale atrocities. Eleanor Roosevelt, the driving force behind the Universal Declaration, said and I quote:

“Where, after all, do universal human rights begin? In small places, close to home – so close and so small that they cannot be seen on any maps of the

world. Yet they are the world of the individual person; the neighborhood she or he lives in; the school or college he or she attends; the factory, farm or office where she or he works.” [End of quote]

We gather here today to discuss how we can ensure human rights in the face of current global challenges. I warmly welcome our panelists and look forward to hearing from them on this important issue.

Excellencies, Ladies and gentlemen, colleagues,

As we look back over the past 75 years, universal human rights are a success story – but their realization remains a challenge. Yes, the idea of human dignity, of inalienable rights which every individual has just because it is part of the human race, has transformed our idea of human coexistence and legitimate forms of governance forever. This idea seems to be well established – at least when we look at all the political statements delivered by the leaders of this world.

And yes, the rights enshrined in the Universal Declaration, later codified in the Covenants and other human rights instruments and further institutionalized by the Vienna Declaration and Program of Action, promise a life in dignity for every individual, free from violence, manipulation or suffering. This promise gave and continues to give hope to countless persons all over the world.

However, this hope is too often disappointed. Human rights violations and abuses are a reality in all countries of the world. There are still too many people suffering under the violation and abuse of their human rights – including in our direct neighborhood. Both, well established standards and the universality of the human rights are increasingly questioned. The abuse of security and political stability objectives still lead to the violation of fundamental human rights. The application of the death penalty is still a reality in numerous states. Yes, in order to realize the human rights of every individual in this world, much remains to be done and we shall never forget this pivotal struggle.

At the same time, we are challenged with global developments putting the enjoyment of universal human rights at even greater risk. The biggest challenges of our time have enormous consequences for individual's human rights. Let me give a few examples:

- Armed conflicts are on the rise and they are deadlier, people lose their life or their loved ones, families are torn apart, livelihoods are destroyed, people have to flee violence and elementary civilian infrastructure is destroyed. Yes, human rights remain applicable and relevant during armed conflict. But the destructive dynamics of war pose immense challenges on this application.
- Climate change and environmental degradation in general fundamentally threaten human rights.
- The energy crisis has an impact on human rights, as the infrastructure depending on energy supply is directly linked with individual's rights such as the right to water, the right to food and the right to an adequate standard of living, just to mention a few.
- The Corona pandemic made the difficult balance between conflicting human rights such as the right to health on the one side and the right to free movement and economic liberties on the other side very visible.
- And new technologies make everyday life easier, in many ways. But they also pose immense risks to the enjoyment of fundamental human rights, both offline and online in an increasingly digitalized world.

Excellencies,  
Ladies and gentlemen,  
Dear colleagues

Universal human rights are an indispensable part of our response to these global challenges:

- Without human rights, there can be no healthy and prosperous society and no sustainable peace, because the disappointed promise of a life in freedom and dignity is a root cause of every conflict.
- Human rights are a booster for the resilience of any society. Because they enable every individual to develop his or her potential and play his or her role in society. Indeed, that is what characterizes strong societies: That individuals contribute in their diversity to the wellbeing of all, that all people in emergency situations can organize themselves easily and help each other in order to emerge from the crisis stronger together.
- Human rights help to reduce inequalities by ensuring fundamental rights to all and to tighten the social fabric of a society. They are the prerequisite for civic engagement free from coercion and fear. This creates networks and collaborative frameworks that meaningfully complement government work and enable public-private partnerships for the benefit of society as a whole.
- Human rights are also a prerequisite for sustainable business, as they foster creativity and innovation and allow space for individual initiatives that diversify the economy and thus make the business location more resistant and resilient.
- Finally, human rights are the unifying factor that binds us together as humanity. What human beings all over the globe need is very similar, even if living conditions on our planet vary greatly. Human rights ensure

people have basic needs met. This unifying factor should unite us more strongly in our search for solutions to the challenges we face.

In short: Human rights are the cornerstone, on which prosperous and healthy societies are built. But human rights are not a given, they need our continuous support and engagement. Let us take the commemoration of the Universal Declaration and the Vienna Declaration and Program of Action as a renewed call to action.

I thank you.