

UNITED NATIONS



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THE DEPUTY SECRETARY-GENERAL

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REMARKS ON HUMAN RIGHTS DAY

New York, 9 December 2015

**Mr. President,
Excellencies,
Panellists,
Delegates and Colleagues,**

Each year on Human Rights Day, we reaffirm our commitment to the rights and freedoms outlined in the UN Charter and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

We remind ourselves of our solemn duty to defend and protect human rights.

Today, we face immense challenges in fulfilling that duty. The scale and severity of human suffering caused by today's multiple crises is intolerable. The consequences for international peace and security, for development and for human rights, are unsustainable.

We simply cannot accept and afford to go on like this.

We recognize, yet again, the necessity to focus much greater attention on prevention in all organs and entities of the United Nations.

In 2013, the Secretary-General launched the Human Rights up Front initiative. This initiative reflects the need to uphold the human rights pillar of the United Nation. It also reflects our conviction that violations of human rights are important early warning signs of instability, conflict and atrocities.

The rationale of Human Rights up Front initiative is basically to have the UN system work more effectively in the spirit of chapter I of the UN Charter: “To maintain international peace and security, and to that end: to take effective collective measures for the prevention and removal of threats to the peace”.

In the United Nations, we have long spoken about the need to give higher priority to early warning and prevention.

We have also for long sought to better integrate UN action across the three pillars of our work.

But, in fact, it was a major UN setback that provided the galvanizing moment for the initiative.

In 2012, the Secretary-General commissioned an internal panel to review United Nations action during the horrific final stages of the conflict in Sri Lanka. We had seen widespread loss of life and serious violations of humanitarian law and human rights during those final months.

The Panel noted that some failings were similar to those which had occurred fifteen years earlier in Rwanda. We were repeating past errors.

The Panel concluded that there had been a “systemic failure” in UN action. Systemic failures require systemic solutions.

Against this somber background, the Secretary-General called for an action plan to address the report’s findings. This became Human Rights up Front.

The initiative is grounded in Charter obligations and existing UN mandates, including Member State resolutions on early warning, analysis, and prevention.

The initiative calls for three types of change within the United Nations System.

The first is cultural change: to make sure that our responsibilities in the area of prevention and protection are known by all UN staff.

The second is operational change: to promote better coordination between United Nations development, humanitarian, political and human rights entities and actors.

And the third is more effective engagement with Member States on situations of concern.

One immediate result of these evolving changes has been greater recognition, not least among staff, of how problems in one pillar of the UN work affect the other pillars. Violations of economic and social rights can have far reaching consequences for peace and security, and vice versa.

The initiative is also intended to make the United Nations more accountable to deliver on mandates for prevention.

In the future, we expect to see much-improved early warning and early response. We anticipate better support to national authorities by contributions to programmes and by strengthening capacity. In this pursuit, we look forward to enhanced engagement with Member States.

Human Rights up Front is an approach that the United Nations should apply to all countries and in all contexts. Its focus is on prevention, long before serious violations occur. If the situation deteriorates, it provides a guide and a standard for UN action, based on transparency and dialogue.

We have seen the relevance of this approach this year in the high-level reviews of UN peace operations and peacebuilding. Both reviews urged the United Nations to give priority to prevention and to overcome fragmentation in the system.

In addition, the newly adopted historic 2030 Agenda recognizes that peaceful and inclusive societies, access to justice, and effective and accountable institutions are essential for sustainable development.

It recognizes that acute development needs can be drivers of conflict. We should also recall that the human rights we are seeking to preserve include the fundamental right to development.

As we move to implement these important findings on mutually reinforcing interdependence, we must remove the silos that have long characterized our work.

The Human Rights up Front initiative, with its emphasis on coordination, is already helping us in this regard.

Human Rights up Front is about improving how the UN system functions and how staff members perform. It does not directly address the role of Member States in prevention. But Member States may consider if there are elements of the initiative which they can usefully adopt for their national efforts.

Member States also have an important role to play in promoting the internal changes which Human Rights up Front seeks to achieve, and, of course, to provide political support for preventive action.

At its most basic, Human Rights up Front is about returning to the essence of the Charter. It is about highlighting prevention and bringing the three pillars of United Nations action together – peace and security, development and human rights. By this, Human Rights up Front can significantly strengthen United Nations efforts to live up to the Charter in the spirit of the dream and aspirations of “We the Peoples”.