

## EU priorities for the 46<sup>th</sup> session of the Human Rights Council

Geneva, 19 February 2021

The coronavirus pandemic has magnified and exacerbated some of the world's greatest challenges, including in relation to human rights, democracy and the rule of law. We therefore welcome that the 46<sup>th</sup> session of the Human Rights Council will take place, albeit in a virtual format, from 22 February to 23 March. *"Across the world, human rights and democracy are facing increasing challenges. Even before the pandemic, we were witnessing a **gradual and persistent backsliding in human rights**, which has now been further exacerbated by the COVID-19 crisis,"* says Ambassador Walter Stevens, Head of the European Union Delegation to the United Nations Office in Geneva and adds: *"The need for strong, coherent and effective, collective action on human rights and democracy is more vital than ever. We should do our utmost to allow the Human Rights Council to continue its important work and send a strong message on the **centrality and paramount importance of human rights in the midst of crisis, notwithstanding the sanitary and technical challenges.**"*

EU Ambassador Stevens also highlights the EU Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy 2020-2024. It reaffirms EU's commitment to protect and support human rights and democracy and to further advance universal values, including the new [EU Global Human Rights Sanctions Regime](#), which was added to **the EU toolbox to address human rights violations and abuses** in December 2020. *"The new Sanctions Regime is now part of our broader strategy on human rights, which we also pursue through our multilateral actions in the Human Rights Council. In a world where some try to repudiate or redefine the universality of human rights, the EU must be more than a moral force. We need to be more assertive, speak out and act,"* he underlines.

The European Union condemns in the strongest terms the **military coup carried out in Myanmar**. Given the urgency and the clear threat to Myanmar's democratic transition of the past ten years, ahead of HRC46 the EU, together with the UK, initiated a Special Session on the human rights implications of the crisis in the country. The session concluded with a [Resolution](#) calling for the release of all persons arbitrarily detained in connection with the coup and the lifting of the state of emergency. The EU will also lead a resolution on Myanmar during HRC46 to address the human rights concerns in the country at this critical point in time, to renew the mandate of the Special Rapporteur for one year and to express continued support for accountability processes, including the Independent Investigative Mechanism on Myanmar as set up by the HRC.

The European Union continues to **stand firmly with the people of Belarus**. The authorities must heed their persistent calls for a democratic future, including the upholding of human rights. Violence against peaceful protesters, as well as assault and intimidation campaigns targeting, in particular, human right defenders, journalists and civil society activists must cease at once. All arbitrarily apprehended persons, including political prisoners and journalists, must be released immediately and unconditionally. We therefore will ensure follow up actions at this session, taking into account the upcoming report of the High Commissioner to the Council.

Credible information points **to widespread, systemic and grave violations of human rights in North Korea (DPRK)**. It is important that the Human Rights Council continues to draw attention to the severity of the situation. We will once again lead a resolution that highlights the wide range of violations and the need for accountability. The resolution will also renew the mandate of the Special Rapporteur for one year and extend the mandate of the "OHCHR Accountability Project" for two years.

15 March will mark a **sad 10th year anniversary** of the beginning of the ongoing crisis in Syria. From the onset, the EU has spoken up against the persistent, widespread, systematic and serious human

rights violations and abuses by all parties to the conflict, in particular by the Syrian regime and its allies. We will continue mobilising all the tools at our disposal in support of the Syrian people to finally reach a negotiated political solution in line with UNSC resolution 2254. Accountability remains key, and we will therefore once again advocate for a strong resolution at HRC46, including the renewal of the mandate of the Commission of Inquiry.

In a world of increasing diversity, it is **more important than ever that states guarantee the freedom of religion or belief (FORB)**. Holding or not holding a religion or belief is an absolute right and may not be limited under any circumstances. In this vein, the EU will present, as in previous years, a resolution at the Human Rights Council to promote and protect this fundamental right, whereby we hope that the Council will once again adopt the resolution by consensus.

In line with the [EU Anti-Racism Action Plan 2020-2025](#) the EU will seek to further strengthen partnerships with key international, regional and bilateral partners towards a new revitalised approach to the **anti-racism agenda**.

The Covid-19 crisis has revealed even further the urgency to **ensure that no child is left behind**. The socio-economic consequences of the pandemic, as well as the preventive measures have a serious impact on children and their wellbeing. Harmful effects of the pandemic on children include the exacerbation of pre-existing disparities in education, threats to child survival and health, risks for child safety and children falling into poverty. With the biennialization of the EU-GRULAC led resolution on the rights of the child, the EU will concentrate its effort at this session on the annual day meeting on the rights of the child. There will be a strong focus on children being left behind, within and beyond the context of the pandemic.

The COVID-19 crisis and its socio-economic consequences are also having a **disproportionate impact on women, persons with disabilities, elderly persons, and on all persons in vulnerable situations**, including refugees, migrants and internally displaced persons. We will therefore continue to advocate that response measures should fully consider those most at risk of human rights violations, including of violence, and marginalisation, stigmatisation, xenophobia and racism and other forms of discrimination.

We need to pay special attention to the growing impact of the pandemic on all human rights, democracy and the rule of law. The COVID-19 **pandemic should not be used as a pretext to limit democratic and civic space**. The respect of the rule of law and of international obligations, including those related to freedom of expression, freedom of the press and access to information online and offline must be upheld.

All EU interventions and statements will be posted on the [EU Delegation's website](#). For further updates, follow the EU Delegation's Twitter and Instagram account @EU\_UNGeneva.

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