EUROPEAN UNION SPECIAL REPRESENTATIVE FOR HUMAN RIGHTS

**EUSR for Human Rights – Newsletter – February 2026**

The weekend that marked the shift from February to March presented us with a reality of more war, insecurity and violations of international law. We witnessed a dramatic turn of events with the strikes by Israel and the United States in **Iran**, followed by Iranian missile and drone strikes across the region.

The reverberations in **Lebanon** and the **Occupied Palestinian Territory** are extremely alarming, as outlined in my statement. While the increase in oil and gas prices is on everyone's lips, the shipping crisis has also halted the operations of UN agencies and partners seeking to deliver lifesaving relief a number of emergencies.

February also marked another painful anniversary for **Ukraine**: that of Russia's occupation of Crimea in 2014 and the anniversary of the large-scale invasion on 24 February 2022, which I commemorated in Kyiv. On that occasion, I called upon Russia to immediately and unconditionally release **Appaz Kurtamet** and other political prisoners in Crimea. Ukraine was also part of my discussions at the **Munich Security Conference**, where I also had a number of media engagements, including interviews with Der Standard and former EU Youth Delegate **Giulia Tariello** for MSC YouTube Studio.

February also coincided with two tragic anniversaries for Russians: the deaths of Alexei Navalny in 2022 and of Boris Nemtsov in 2015, for which Kremlin bears responsibility. Both have left important political legacies, having advocated for a modern, prosperous and democratic Russia.

As in previous months, I continue to follow with undiminished concern the plight of the civilian population in **Sudan** and **eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo**. That is why, on the sidelines of my mission to **Kenya**, I did not hesitate to discuss with NGO representatives and journalists about other ways for the EU to contribute to improving this situation. I continue to engage on **Venezuela**, where we witnessed the release of over 500 political prisoners. I applaud the work of Venezuelan civil society. They deserve the support of independent international monitoring in the country. I will continue to press for further credible steps towards democratization in Venezuela, including repealing the laws used to supress civic space.

On 27 February, we celebrated **World NGO Day**, and I issued a statement as well as a video message to mark the occasion. On this day, we stand firm in our commitment to protect and support a strong, independent and resilient civil society and to strengthen partnerships with NGOs across the globe. I could not do my work without them.

Engaging with **students** is a major priority for me, because I believe that the work we do on human rights is primarily for future generations. I used the occasion of the 20th anniversary of the EU International Relations and Diplomacy Programme of the College of Europe to outline my ideas on a more effective way to engage and communicate on human rights in times of geopolitical turmoil. You can watch the full speech here.

**BILATERAL ENGAGEMENTS**

From 9 to 11 February, I visited **Kenya** for my long overdue first engagement on the African continent. I met with government representatives, including Prime Cabinet Secretary **Musalia Mudavadi** and Cabinet Secretary for Interior **Kipchumba Murkomen**. I also engaged with civil society organisations,

youth and media representatives to discuss a range of issues, including democratic governance, the rule of law, gender equality, and the state of civic space, in a context where the country is preparing for general elections in August 2027. During the visit, I had several media engagements, including interviews in The Star and People Daily. I also recorded a video recapping my mission.

In **Ukraine**, Russia's ongoing full-scale invasion has continued to devastate civilian infrastructure, trigger widespread displacement and inflict immense suffering in the temporarily occupied territories. On 24 February I travelled to Kyiv to pay tribute to all the brave people of Ukraine who have stood up to the aggressor for four long years. I listened to the testimonies of experts and human rights defenders who have worked tirelessly to document Russia's crimes. They fear that warmer weather may encourage Russia to move from targeting energy infrastructure to water supplies. February has undoubtedly come to symbolize Ukraine's darkest hours but it also marks another month of progress in accession talks and another step closer to joining the EU, something I discussed with the Deputy Prime Minister for European integration, **Taras Kachka**.

**MULTILATERAL ENGAGEMENTS**

In early December, I travelled to Geneva for the **5th Strategic Consultations between the EU and the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights** (OHCHR), together with Representatives from the Commission, European External Action Service (EEAS) and the Director of the EU Fundamental Rights Agency, **Sirpa Rautio**. These Consultations take stock and advance for the breadth of cooperation between the EU and OHCHR. The EU is not only a key donor of the OHCHR, we are strategic partners in the promotion and protection of human rights, within the EU and globally.

After valuable exchanges on human rights protection in the area of digital technologies and migration, we are now looking to deepen our cooperation in the area of peace and security. Human rights are essential for the prevention of conflict but also to build confidence between parties as a pathway to peace. During the month of March, we are further engaging the High Commissioner in an exchange with all of the EU Heads of Delegations at the Annual **EU Ambassadors' Conference** to reinforce how we work together in countries around the world to support governments and populations in the protection of human rights.

I returned to Geneva again at the end of February for the **High-Level Segment of the UN Human Rights Council** (HRC) and had the opportunity to reconnect with the **President of the General Assembly** (PGA), **Anna-Lena Baerbock.** The PGA plays an important role in ensuring that human rights remain central in the ongoing UN reforms. PGA Baerbock is a strong voice in this regard, and I fully support her call to the HRC to never look away as the rights of women and girls are restricted or completely undermined, as is the case in **Afghanistan**. The EU has an important role in ensuring we stay on track and galvanize broad cross-regional support around multilateralism and human rights.

I also had the pleasure of exchanging with newly appointed **High Commissioner for Refugees Barham Salih.** High Commissioner Salih, a former refugee himself, takes up his position fully aware of the political and financial constraints that challenge effective refugee response, while humanitarian crises are on the increase. I am reassured by his personal conviction as a former refugee and vision of limiting long-term displacements. Creating the conditions for security, livelihoods and services to enable refugees to return when the situation in their countries of origin improves is an interest for us all, the UN, host nations and countries of origin.

In Brussels, I met with **Philippe Lazzarini**, **Commissioner-General** of the **UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA).** Since I started in my role, I have made it a point to extend my full support to the agency, as it is the only one with the capacity and expertise to ensure essential service delivery to Palestinian refugees in the OPT, as confirmed by the ICJ Advisory Opinion of October 2025,

but also in Lebanon, Jordan and Syria, as I have seen during my travels. I expressed my solidarity to the Commissioner-General, including following the decision of Israel to enter and demolish the UNRWA headquarters in East Jerusalem.

**INTERNATIONAL HUMANITARIAN LAW**

The humanitarian situation in and around **Iran** is dramatic, with large-scale population movements and limited access to services and livelihoods across the country. The killing of 168 girls in a strike hitting **Shajareh Tayyebeh girls' elementary school** in Minab and the killing of 12 children in other schools in different locations in Iran is appalling. I am also concerned about the situation of displaced populations in Iran, the largest refugee-hosting country in the world.

Already prior to the US-Israeli attack on Iran, I had stepped up engagement with **Iranian civil society** actors to better understand their needs both inside the country and the broader region. A consultation with approximately 20 civil society organizations working on Iran demonstrated the need to hear directly from them on the most effective ways to ensure protection. I published a video message outlining the conclusions of the consultation.

I am particularly alarmed about reports of a possible **wave of executions** in the coming period, a risk further exacerbated by recent events, as possible retaliatory action for alleged treason. I am also concerned about the situation of the safety and security of many of those detained. Woman human rights defender and Nobel Peace Laureate **Narges Mohammadi**, currently detained in Zanjan prison, has, for example, reported explosions in her close proximity following airstrikes.

Having recently visited **Lebanon**, including the south of the country, I am alarmed by the impact of the Israeli military's call for the immediate evacuation of everyone south of the Litani River, the totality of Beirut's southern suburbs as well as large parts of the Bekaa valley. The risks of violations of international humanitarian law as well as concerns about other motives than civilian protection have been raised with me by civil society. **International humanitarian law** (IHL) prohibits forced displacement of civilians in armed conflict unless required to ensure the security of civilians or for imperative military reasons. Even when displacement is labelled an evacuation, it must be temporary and civilians must be able to return to their residencies once hostilities end.

At the time of writing, the UN estimates the number of **internally displaced persons** in shelters to be over 100,000 and the government has reported more than 500,000 being registered as displaced, but numbers are increasing by the minute. I extend my full support and solidarity to the Lebanese government as it is managing the response to the crisis. I have also heard devastating accounts of the impact of displacement on **children**, in addition to reports of approximately 20% of those killed being children. NGOs have further alerted me to the use of **white phosphorus** by Israel in Lebanon.

In the fog of war, we have also seen alarming developments across the **Occupied Palestinian Territory** (OPT). A war with Iran should never be a reason to halt the entry of humanitarian aid into Gaza, and I continue to urge the reopening of all crossings. I have been informed of increased **settler attacks** against Palestinian communities, particularly in so-called Area C. As movement has been further restricted for NGOs – including Israeli NGOs – Palestinian communities who have previously benefited from **protective presence** have been made increasingly vulnerable. These attacks could be easily stopped by Israeli military orders.

I also take note of a statement by **UN independent experts** who called upon the international community to ensure that any efforts to reconstruct Gaza, including in the framework of the **Board of Peace**, are guided by international law and human rights norms and standards. In this regard, it is essential that Palestinians themselves are in charge of decisions regarding their future, and experts

recalled that the right to self-determination also extends to decisions concerning reconstruction. The statement also refers to a recent analysis by the Special Rapporteur on the right to adequate housing and 'domicide' in Gaza as well as the launch of the draft Guiding Principles on Reconstruction, emphasizing that persons and peoples affected by conflict have the right to reconstruction and reparation to restore their economic, social, cultural, civil and political rights.

I was pleased to hear that the **Israeli Constitutional Court** granted injunctive relief to the petition of 37 international NGOs subjected to **re-registration requirements** for humanitarian aid delivery to the OPT. However, this is merely a temporary solution, and I continue to call upon the cancellation of the re-registration process.

When I was in Geneva, I met with **Geneva Call**, who navigates the uneasy task of engaging with armed group and de facto authorities to promote respect of IHL and advance human rights in conflict-affected contexts. With its Director General, **Alain Délétroz**, we discussed how drones are fast reshaping how wars are fought – with **Ukraine** being a case in point, how to ensure operators' respect for IHL but also the risk that they may fall in the hands of criminal organisations.

Geneva Call outlined how its engagement with armed groups and *de facto* authorities, including humanitarian dialogue, Deeds of Commitment and targeted awareness-raising efforts, have encouraged these actors to better respect IHL, leading to behavioural changes that strengthen civilian protection and cultivate a culture of compliance.

**HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS AND POLITICAL PRISONERS**

In **Venezuela**, local NGO **Foro Penal** reported on the release of over 500 **political prisoners** and the adoption of the **amnesty law**. The adoption of the **amnesty law** holds the promise of the unconditional release of **political prisoners** that must be followed through in practice. We need to see further such steps. A number of laws, including the law against hatred, law on oversight regulation, operation and financing of NGOs and non-profit organisations, Simón Bolivar law and the Supreme Court regulation on courts with jurisdiction over terrorism, have been previously used to curtail civic space and persecute the opposition. Unhindered access for OHCHR to monitor and provide support will be key and has been a longstanding call of the EU.

In February, my office engaged again on the case of **Abdulhadi Al-Khawaja**, a Danish-Bahraini human rights defender sentenced to life imprisonment in Bahrain in 2011. I was pleased to hear of slight improvements to his detention conditions, although I urge the Bahraini authorities to continue allowing for both in-person visits and phone conversations with his loved ones, pending his full and unconditional release.

On a more alarming note, I was informed that access to healthcare, treatment and medication has been severely restricted in the political prisoner wing of Jau prison, while communication with prison management is cumbersome. Mr. Al-Khawaja is suffering from serious ailments, and requires urgent medical attention. Moreover, **Sheikh Mohammed Habib Al-Muqdad**, a Swedish-Bahraini citizen also held in Jau, has experienced a serious deterioration of his health and is not receiving the care he needs. I urge the authorities to provide both Mr. Al-Khawaja and Mr. Al-Muqdad the care they require, and call upon their release on humanitarian grounds. I further remain concerned about their safety in the context of the ongoing crisis in the region.

In the context of **Tunisia**, I have been made aware of the case of 67-year-old anti-racism activist **Saâdia Mosbah**, who has been detained since May 2024 along with eight former employees of the anti-racist Mnemty association on charges of suspected money laundering, among others. The hearing has been postponed to 12 March, but until now, the process has been marked by serious concerns related to

due process, including the right to defence. Furthermore, Ms. Mosbah's pre-trial detention exceeds the legal maximum of 14 months. I have also been informed of concerns related to her detention conditions and deteriorating health, and I call upon the Tunisian authorities to ensure her timely release, in line with Tunisia's own legal requirements.

I was heartbroken to hear about the assassination of **Yanar Mohammed**, an iconic women's rights advocate from Iraq. She was the co-founder and director of the Organization of Women's Freedom in Iraq, and served as editor of Al-Mousawat ("Equality") newspaper. During her life, she advocated for women's rights, opposed domestic violence and operated safe houses for women fleeing threats and tribal violence. I call upon the Iraqi authorities to ensure accountability for her killing, and to take effective measures for protection of women human rights defenders.

Finally, it was a pleasure to catch up with the leader of the **Belarusian** opposition, **Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya**, during the Munich Security Conference. We must work until every last political prisoner is released and to ensure justice is served to them.

**RULE OF LAW AND DEMOCRACY**

I continue to follow developments in **Bangladesh** following the recent elections. I hope that the new government will demonstrate a genuine commitment to the rule of law, democratic principles, and the protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms. Accountability, inclusive governance, and independent institutions will be essential to strengthen public trust and ensuring long-term stability. I look forward to engaging with the new authorities to explore how the EU and Bangladesh can further deepen cooperation in support of multilateralism, the rules-based international order, and shared global responsibilities.

In **Guatemala**, we are entering a crucial phase for judicial independence as the elections of judges for the Constitutional Court, Members for the Supreme Electoral Tribunal and the next Prosecutor General are approaching. The EU is committed to supporting the plight of the Guatemalan people and the efforts of democratic forces to put an end to the misuse of the judicial system to criminalize human rights defenders, independent journalists, indigenous peoples and others for defending their rights. The EU mission of technical experts accompanying the election process is an innovative way of support, while my office also continues monitoring the situation.

The **draft bill reinstating the death penalty** for terrorism-related crimes continues to be discussed in **Israeli parliament**. It is of utmost importance that this bill does not become law: the death penalty is a violation of the right to life, cannot be executed without violating the absolute right to be free from torture and other ill-treatment. It further has no deterrent effect and renders any judicial errors irreversible. Approving the bill would represent a grave step backward on positions Israel has itself expressed in the past. UN experts have further warned that the proposed mandatory death penalty for terrorist attacks would discriminate against Palestinians in the OPT.

**RIGHTS OF PERSONS ON THE MOVE**

On 10 February, the European Parliament approved amendments to the **EU Asylum Procedures Regulation**, subsequently also adopted by the Council, revising the 'safe third country' concept and introducing an EU-wide list of countries of origin considered 'safe'. The new rules seek to streamline the processing of asylum requests, enabling Member States to declare asylum applications inadmissible if protection could have been sought in a safe third country.

A number of civil society organisations have contacted my office, expressing concerns that the reforms may detract from individualised assessments of asylum claims and lead to transfers of asylum seekers

to countries with which they have little to no connection and where the prospects for a fair asylum procedure could be uncertain. It is key to ensure the **right to asylum** and the **principle of non-refoulement**; effective migration management should not come at the expense of the protection of fundamental rights.

One of the priority issues of my November mission to **Egyp**t was to better understand the status of the preparation of the executive regulations (bylaws) of Law No. 164 of the **Asylum Law**, adopted in 2024. I have been informed that the Egyptian Government has indeed completed the preparation of the regulations, and I look forward to learning more about their content. During my mission, I expressed the need to ensure a sufficient transition period as refugee status determination is shifted from the UNHCR to a new state-run Permanent Committee for Refugee Affairs (PCRA), ensuring full compliance with international law. In their recent statement, UN experts raised alarm over violations against refugees and migrants in Egypt.

**JUSTICE AND ACCOUNTABILITY**

In February, I met with the **UN Independent Investigative Mechanism for Myanmar (IIMM)**, who gave me an important update on ongoing efforts to collect and preserve evidence of serious international crimes committed in Myanmar, including against the Rohingya population. The discussion confirmed the urgent need to advance accountability and to sustain international support for justice mechanisms, as the military continues attacks against civilians and repression across the country.

Ahead of my upcoming mission to **Syria**, originally planned for the end of March but likely to be postponed, I have held various discussions with Syrian civil society and UN actors. In a meeting with prominent **gender justice advocates**, I was informed about concerns related to the draft **Transitional Justice Law**, which includes provisions allowing for the death penalty, and as it stands, does not take into consideration the gendered dimension of transitional justice efforts.

The gender justice advocates also told me about ongoing **abductions of women** and a shortage of expertise among national judges on transitional justice, the effective sidelining of women in many discussions on the future of the country, threats against women's civil society and ongoing attacks in media and social media against women. They also presented heartbreaking accounts of continued searches for the missing, and emphasized the need to ensure the meaningful participation of victims, survivors and their families in all decision-making. All these issues are of essence to ensure sustainable peace in the country.

In a discussion on **gender-responsive reconstruction** convened by **EuroMed Feminist Initiative**, I was presented an important handbook, which outlines the key ways in which economic, social, political and legal reconstruction can be made more inclusive. The discussion helped me understand the ways in which reconstruction may reproduce exclusion, and we as the international community should do our utmost to prevent this. Many also feel that the international community has abandoned women's civil society, a priority for many international actors during the Assad regime.

Finally, a consultation with **over 50 Syrian civil society organizations** demonstrated the need to address both past and ongoing violations, and to ensure that not only victor's justice is served in Syria. These conversations have also confirmed that the work of the **UN Independent Commission of Inquiry for Syria** is invaluable. Civil society organizations asked for the key elements of the mandate - to independently investigate, document, and establish an authoritative record of violations of international human rights law and international humanitarian law, identify patterns and perpetrators, and preserve evidence for accountability – to be preserved.

Indeed, victims and survivors, and we as the EU, look to the Commission as a pillar of accountability and an important tool to report human rights violations in the country. As the Human Rights Council prepares to discuss the Commission's mandate, the EU reiterates the call for its renewal. We also urge the Syrian transitional authorities to ensure full and unimpeded access to the **International, Impartial and Independent Mechanism** (IIIM) and the **Independent Institution on Missing Persons** for Syria. While the authorities should be in the lead of transitional justice efforts, international actors have invaluable expertise and capacities which can support national efforts.

**PEACE AND SECURITY**

With **Interpeace** President and CEO, **Itonde Kakoma**, we reflected on the complexities and challenges of peacebuilding, at a time when the global ecosystem is shaken. Although some might profit from conflicts, at the macro-level and in the long-term, humanity needs peace and stability to prosper. As mediation and peacebuilding actors are currently facing funding pressures, the EU remains a reliable partner. We agreed on the importance of mobilising the private sector and investment structures who have a long-term approach to investment, to support sustainable development and peace.

The changing geopolitical landscape calls for new, cross-regional, partnerships, grounded in the universal nature of human rights. We must engage with emerging partners, restore the UN's relevance, and support local, community-level ownership of peacebuilding endeavours. My interlocutor emphasised the importance of drawing greater attention to **forgotten conflicts**, noting that the longer they persist, the more complex they become to resolve. With more than 130 conflicts worldwide, the work of these organisations is more needed than ever before.

**LOOKING AHEAD**

In early March, I travel to **Washington DC** to meet with my counterpart in the State Department, the Human rights Commissions in Congress, civil society and the Inter-American Commission for Human Rights. As the **European Parliament** held a plenary debate on **State violence in Minneapolis** and the rule of law in the **United States**, Commissioner Kostas Kadis on behalf of the High Representative, pointed to my upcoming visit, during which these concerns will be raised directly with our US counterparts. As mentioned, my mission to **Syria** at the end of March is unfortunately likely to be postponed due to the regional situation.

*Kajsa Ollongren*

*EU Special Representative for Human Rights*

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