



## **EUSR for Human Rights – Newsletter – March 2026**

During the month of March, we have seen a deepening of the crisis across the Middle East, with alarming developments in Iran, Lebanon, the Occupied Palestinian Territory (OPT), Israel and neighbouring Gulf countries. Both the UN and civil society have raised alarm bells on attacks that could constitute grave violations of **international humanitarian law** (IHL) and rhetoric by a number of leaders to violate its fundamental protections.

Therefore, I have decided to launch a **video series** – to be published over the coming days – on what IHL means in practice. I also discussed these issues, and particularly the impact of war on women and children, also with the Regional Leader of **World Vision, Eleanor Monbiot**.

In **Ukraine**, too, the situation for the civilian population living in communities near the frontline remained particularly dire. The UN Human Rights Monitoring Mission in Ukraine reports that during the first two months of this year, 60 per cent of all civilian casualties were in frontline regions and almost half of those killed were older persons. In March, the danger to civilians in Ukraine has only intensified.

In March, I visited the **United States**, where I met with key interlocutors to discuss transatlantic relations in the area of human rights and global developments, including on **Ukraine, Cuba and Venezuela**. In an interview on the [National Public Radio Morning Edition](#), I explained my view on the EU-US relationship and the war in the Middle East from a human rights perspective. I also gave interviews in [Foreign Policy Magazine](#), and [Semafor](#), and appeared live on **Morning Joe**, primarily about forcibly disappeared Ukrainian children. During my US visit, we marked **International Women's Day**. In a [video message](#), I pleaded for global action counter the backsliding.

In late March, I had an engaging meeting with the leadership of the **Global Campus of Human Rights**, the world's largest network for postgraduate education in human rights and democratisation, comprising over 100 universities and eight regional hubs. As we witness challenges to the rules-based international order and a concerning suppression of academic freedom globally, human rights education remains the backbone of mutual understanding, tolerance, and democratic resilience.

Discussions on the importance of human rights in the EU's foreign policy have continued throughout the month, including in the context of the annual [EU Ambassador's Conference](#) in a discussion with **UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Volker Türk**. I was pleased to see that the majority of EU Ambassadors agreed that so called values – or universal norms in the case of human rights – and interests are not contradictory. Human rights *are* part and parcel of our interests, and also of many partners around the world.

## **BILATERAL ENGAGEMENTS**

I visited Washington D.C. to meet with the **State Department**, engagements on **Capitol Hill** as well as with **US civil society**. It was a pleasure to reconnect with [Assistant Secretary for Human Rights, Democracy and Labour, Riley Barnes](#). We had a fruitful exchange on how the EU and the US are working on the return of forcibly disappeared **Ukrainian children**. Documentation is crucial, both to guarantee the return of as many children as possible, and to ensure the right to truth. It is equally important not to lose sight of the situation of the many more children living under Russian occupation

and the need to ensure humanitarian corridors. For me, it is crucial that any negotiated solution on Ukraine has to be by and for the Ukrainians.

We also spoke about the democratic transition in **Venezuela**. The EU has a long history of engagement on democracy in Venezuela, and the recommendations of the 2021 **EU Election Observation Mission** remain relevant as the country moves towards the next elections. The future of Venezuela has to be decided by the Venezuelan people.

I also had the opportunity to meet with the co-chair of the **Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission** of U.S. Congress, [Congressman James McGovern](#), who shared his efforts to continue bi-partisan engagement on human rights including in the Americas region. US civil society actors shared their concerns regarding increased limitations to the freedom of media, intimidation against judges as well as the impacts of the US policy on minorities. I shared with interlocutors that people in Europe are following the situation in the US very closely.

In March, I met again with **H. E. Eshete Tilahun Woldeyes, Ethiopian Ambassador** to the EU. We had an important discussion about the situation in Ethiopia, including in the context of the upcoming elections in June. In preparation of my upcoming mission, we also discussed transitional justice.

I was also glad to have the opportunity to meet **Guillaume Ngefa, Minister of Justice of the Democratic Republic of Congo**, and to learn more about his plans to reform the justice sector as well as efforts to address corruption. We also discussed the situation in eastern Congo and ways to ensure accountability.

On the sidelines of 2026 the **Forces of the Future conference**, I was delighted to meet the **former President of Malawi, Dr. Lazarus Chakwera**, who was recently appointed the Commonwealth Secretary-General's Special Envoy to **Tanzania**. We exchanged about the support for democracy and a sustainable future for future generations in Africa.

## **MULTILATERAL ENGAGEMENTS**

In March, in the context of the EU Ambassadors Conference, I attended a panel discussion with UN High Commissioner **Volker Türk**. Together with the EU Ambassadors, we discussed whether human rights are an asset or irritant in EU foreign policy. In a show of hands, the overwhelming majority of ambassadors agreed that they are, indeed, an asset. The High Commissioner and his office continue to be a key partner in all my work, but also that of EU Delegations around the world. His initiative on a "**Global Alliance for Human Rights**" should be supported. In the context of the Ambassadors Conference, I also a chance to connect with individual ambassadors.

I further had the opportunity to meet with **Li Fung, the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) Representative in Sudan**. We discussed the catastrophic humanitarian situation in Sudan, the drivers of this conflict—including the flow of weapons into the country—drone attacks on civilian infrastructure, child soldiers, as well as the prospects for the country's recovery following a ceasefire. Resolving this situation requires us to join forces, a key message for the upcoming **Berlin Conference on peace and reconstruction**, scheduled for next month.

## **INTERNATIONAL HUMANITARIAN LAW**

In addition to a massive civilian death toll across the Middle East, we have seen strikes on civilian targets such as residential areas, oil refineries and desalination plants as well as other civilian targets in Iran's neighbouring countries. **Amnesty International** reported on Iran's use of inherently

discriminate cluster munitions delivered by ballistic missiles in attacks on **Israel** and the **OPT**, which may amount to war crimes. In **Iran** itself, we have seen an immense death toll and thousands injured, including a large number of children.

In **Lebanon**, in addition to a mounting death toll, the large-scale and unspecified Israeli **displacement orders** in South Lebanon, the southern suburbs of Beirut and large parts of the Bekaa valley have displaced over a million people in just a few weeks. According to [OHCHR](#), the blanket nature of the orders brings into question their effectiveness, a requirement under IHL, and risks amounting to forced displacement, a war crime and crime against humanity. According to IHL, civilians must also be able return to their homes – and an environment which guarantees their physical safety and access to basic services - when the hostilities are over.

According to the [World Health Organization](#), we have already seen the killing of over 50 **health workers** in Lebanon since the beginning of March. According to Reporters Without Borders, more than 220 **journalists** have been killed in Lebanon since 2023. While many have indeed been killed in Israeli strikes, Hezbollah continues to restrict journalists' access and also accuses them for collaboration with Israel. Both medical workers and journalists are protected under IHL.

During my visit to Lebanon last year, I strongly encouraged the **ratification of the Rome Statute** to ensure domestic accountability pathways. At present, the national legislative framework does not include the possibility to prosecute war crimes or crimes against humanity. Introducing domestic legislation to this end or temporarily accepting International Criminal Court jurisdiction under Article 12.3 of the Rome Statute could be temporary alternatives.

I receive daily reports from civil society on **deadly settler violence** and evictions in the **OPT**, often supported by security forces. According to the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), the level of displacement in 2026 – including due to such attacks - is already at 95 per cent of 2025 levels. An example is the forced eviction of 15 Palestinian families (approximately 100 people) in **Batn al-Hawa**, whose homes are expected to be transferred to settler organization Ateret Cohanim. As Easter is approaching, Israel has restricted access to both **Christian and Muslim holy sites** in Jerusalem's Old City. IHL provides specific protections for places of worship, while religious convictions and liberty should be respected.

In March, I met with the **Association of International Development Agencies (AIDA)**, a coordination forum of nearly 100 international NGOs operating in the OPT. They told about the decision of the Israeli Constitutional Court to grant injunctive relief to petitioning INGOs subjected to the **re-registration scheme** for humanitarian relief delivery in the OPT. One of the issues for organizations registered in the EU is the application of the **General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR)**, and the inability of organizations to comply in case they accept re-registration requirements. Israel also has an obligation under the Geneva Conventions not to interfere with the presence and activities of relief organizations in occupied territory.

According to the **Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC)**, INGOs are estimated to provide at least USD 1 billion of aid and services to Palestinian communities, while the re-registration process severely hinders the delivery of such aid. I am further alarmed that aid flows into Gaza have significantly reduced since the start of the war. Although the **Rafah crossing** was opened for limited movement after a 20-day closure, it is key that humanitarian aid is not restricted due to the ongoing war with Iran.

Last month marked a particularly brutal period in scale and frequency of aerial strikes across **Ukraine**, with repeated large-scale drone and missile attacks hitting cities far beyond the front lines such as

Lviv, Ivano-Frankivsk, Ternopil, Vinnytsia and Kryvyi Rih. Entire communities experienced nights defined by air raid sirens, with homes, hospitals, and energy infrastructure damaged or destroyed. At the end of March, in **Bucha**, the EU Foreign Ministers honoured the memory of victims of the massacre committed by Russia in the first month of the full-scale invasion. Of the civilians killed, many were shot at close range. Some with their hands tied behind their backs.

I am profoundly alarmed by the resumption hostilities and military operations along the border between **Afghanistan** and **Pakistan**. The recent cross-border attacks and airstrikes have resulted in devastating humanitarian consequences, exacerbating what is already one of the most severe humanitarian crises globally. I also discussed this matter with the **Pakistani Ambassador** in Brussels, **H.E. Rahim Hayat Qureshi**.

While global attention is drawn to other major geopolitical crises, such as the escalating conflict in the Middle East, the immense suffering of the civilian population in other parts of the World must not go unnoticed. I urgently call for an immediate de-escalation, maximum restraint, and a definitive cessation of hostilities. Restoring peace through dialogue is absolutely vital in a context where the human rights environment is already under severe pressure, and where further conflict only fuels despair and radicalisation.

#### **TRANSITIONAL JUSTICE AND ACCOUNTABILITY**

This month, I was supposed to travel to **Syria**. Ahead of my mission, I conducted consultations with nearly 100 civil society and UN actors. I identified three main priorities ahead of my mission: transitional justice and accountability, gender equality and women's rights, as well as civic space and media freedom. Unfortunately, my mission was postponed due to the ongoing situation in the region, but I hope to be able to reschedule my visit soon. In the meantime, I published a [blog post](#) on the main findings of my consultations.

I am convinced that even though the goal is for the national authorities to fully take over justice and accountability efforts over time, in the medium-term, the support of international partners is needed. I also discussed this with **Karla Quintana, Head of the Independent Institution on Missing Persons (IIMP)**. She explained that almost every Syrian family has someone disappeared among their loved ones, and the missing persons file is key to ensuring peace and reconciliation in the country. While the new **National Commission on Missing Persons** should be in the lead, the technical support of the IIMP and others is essential.

I was pleased to see the renewal of the mandate of the **UN Commission of Inquiry on Syria**, and I [join the EU in welcoming](#) the access granted to it by the transitional authorities to carry out investigations in the country. In its [March report](#), the Commission concluded that grave violations had been committed in **Sweida** in the context of the violence in July, calling for accountability. The report highlighted widespread executions, torture, gender-based violence and the burning of homes, among other violations, including of sectarian nature, some of which could amount to war crimes and crimes against humanity. The report speaks of three waves of violence committed by government forces, tribal fighters and Druze armed groups, targeting Druze and Bedouin civilians. According to the Commission, Israel's military intervention further contributed to instability.

I also welcome the thorough work of the **UN Commission of Inquiry on Ukraine**. Its [March report](#) clearly qualifies Russia's egregious violations—including the deportation and forcible transfer of Ukrainian children, as well as their enforced disappearance—as crimes against humanity. My office also received testimony from **Lenii Umerova**, a Crimean Tatar and former political prisoner, who spoke

about Russia's increasing practice of arbitrarily arresting Crimeans in exile who attempt to return to their homeland.

At the end of March, the annual resolution on the situation of human rights in **Belarus** in the UN Human Rights Council received historically high support from Member States. It extended the mandate of the Group of Independent Experts as well as of the Special Rapporteur on Belarus, whose reports continue to document ongoing gross, systematic and widespread human rights violations, including arbitrary arrests, inhumane conditions of detention, enforced disappearances and acts of transnational repression intended to harm individuals outside of Belarus.

Finally, in a positive domestic development on accountability in **Lebanon**, Investigative **Judge Tarek Bitar** finally concluded his investigation into the **Beirut Port blast**, a process which has experienced significant delays, including deliberate obstruction by powerful figures. However, the process is far from over, as the file has not been referred to the Public Prosecutor's Office. I continue to emphasize, as I did in the context of [last year's mission](#), that this case is emblematic in the context of Lebanon, and justice and accountability for victims and survivors will open a new chapter in addressing a history of impunity.

## **GENDER EQUALITY, WOMEN'S RIGHTS AND NON-DISCRIMINATION**

On 8 March, we commemorated [International Women's Day](#) at a time where we are witnessing increasing pressures to roll back on rights fought for by generations before us. In March, the 70<sup>th</sup> session of the **Commission on the Status of Women (CSW70)** also took place, concluding with a UN resolution on the use of "appropriate terminology", insisting gender only refer to women and men. The resolution aimed to effectively rewrite the normative framework of the past 30 years and risked significant backsliding. I was pleased to see Belgium present a successful no-action motion on behalf of 26 EU Member States, but the developments in the context of CSW are indicative of the negative trends we are seeing worldwide.

I was alarmed to find out that Israel's Military Advocate General has decided to drop charges against five Israeli soldiers accused for **sexual violence against Palestinian detainees** in **Sde Teiman** detention facility, later also welcomed by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. Civil society has expressed concerns about the impunity granted to perpetrators of grave crimes against Palestinians, emphasizing the need for international justice in the absence of ability of willingness by the Israeli system to do so. Approximately 100 Palestinians have known to have died in Israeli custody since October 2023.

Finally, I was disappointed by the adoption of the **new anti LGBTIQ+-law in Senegal**, which imposes up to ten years in prison for consensual same-sex relations. I am placing my hopes in the President of Senegal that he will not sign a law that violates human rights standards and puts people at increased risk of violence.

## **HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS, DEMOCRACY, CIVIC SPACE, MEDIA FREEDOM**

During my mission to Washington D.C., I met with **Tania Reneaum, Executive Secretary of the Inter-American Commission for Human Rights**. The EU has long maintained a close relationship with the Inter-American Commission and has underscored its essential role in the region. We discussed, among other topics, the spread of laws restricting **civil society organisations** across the region. Only this month, my office has met with civil society organisations from **Peru** and **Ecuador** expressing such concerns, including direct intimidation.

In March, I received an update on **Russia's** use of fear to silence anti-war dissent within the country. Particularly alarming is the situation of human rights lawyers. Despite the threat of disbarment and persecution, they continue to provide a vital lifeline for Russians opposing the war, as well as for Ukrainian civilians detained in Russia.

I am also concerned by recent reporting from the **International Partnership for Human Rights** and **CIVICUS** on the **shrinking civic space** across **Central Asian states**. Of particular concern are restrictions on civil society organisations, crackdowns on independent media and information sharing, violations of protesters' rights, and the persecution of dissenting voices. I intend to raise these developments in my engagements. Long-term security and prosperity—as clearly demonstrated by the EU's example—can only be achieved when human rights are respected, space for independent reporting and democratic debate is protected, and state institutions are held accountable.

This month, I continued my exchanges with Central Asian ambassadors based in Brussels, and had the pleasure of meeting the **Ambassador of Kyrgyzstan, H.E. Aidit Erkin**. The EU's relations with Kyrgyzstan have significantly deepened in recent years, including through the signing of the Enhanced Partnership and Cooperation Agreement. I look forward to engaging on human rights issues in that context.

In my attempt to prioritize the human rights situation in **Tunisia**, I have met with several families of Tunisian human rights defenders. I met with **Affet Mosbah**, sister of **Saadia Mosbah**, who was sentenced to eight years in prison this month allegedly for racist motivations. I [published a video](#) on our discussion, which also highlights the overall situation of civil society, human rights defenders, lawyers and journalists in the country.

I also met with family members of **Sonia Dahmani** and **Ayachi Hammami**. Ms. Dahmani was conditionally released in November 2025, but continues to face charges. Ayachi was convicted under the "conspiracy against the state case" for unsubstantiated claims. I continue to call upon the Tunisian authorities to drop the charges and to release all human rights defenders detained for exercising their legitimate rights.

On a more positive note, I was pleased to learn about the release of blogger and journalist Mohamed Ibrahim Radwan, also known as **Mohamed Oxygen**, on 21 March. While a positive development, I continue to call upon the Egyptian authorities for the release of persons who have exercised their legitimate rights, including cartoonist **Ashraf Omar**, poet **Jalal el-Beheri**, political activist **Sherif el-Rouby**, journalist **Tawfiq Ghanem**, human rights lawyers **Ibrahim Metwally** and **Hoda Abdel Moneim** and translator **Marwa Arafa**.

## **DEATH PENALTY**

Since I started in office, I have been [raising concerns](#) regarding the Israeli **Death Penalty Bill**, which was unfortunately passed into law by the Israeli Knesset on 30 March. Aside from expanding the scope of the use of the death penalty – a violation of the right to life and also a cruel and inhumane punishment – the law is inherently discriminatory in nature. It introduces a differentiated system, in which military courts in the Occupied West Bank – with exclusive jurisdiction over Palestinians (but over which the Knesset should not have jurisdiction) – while the death penalty becomes the default sentence for terrorism-related murder committed by Palestinians. The law is also accompanied by reduced procedural safeguards and no possibility of clemency.

On the other hand, within Israel's civilian system, which applies to both Jewish and Palestinian citizens of Israel and Palestinian residents of East Jerusalem, the law applies exclusively to terrorism-related murder committed with the intent of "denying the existence of the State of Israel". The law further

sets strict timelines for execution and limits opportunities for review. The EU opposes the death penalty in all cases and all circumstances. The bill represents an unprecedented piece of legislation on a global scale, where we have not seen legislative regression on the death penalty. I indeed hope that the petitions before the Israeli Supreme Court will change the course.

In **Iran**, in the context of the ongoing war, we have seen the amplification of repression, as highlighted by UN experts. I was deeply shocked to find out about the execution of Swedish citizen, **Kouroush Keyvani**, among many others who have been accused for their activities in anti-government protests. I also raised alarm bells on mock executions of a young Baha'i, **Peyvand Naimi**, who continues to be at immediate risk. I call upon the Iranian authorities to end this inhumane practice.

## **RIGHTS OF PERSONS OF THE MOVE, RACISM AND FREEDOM OF RELIGION AND BELIEF**

This month, I was pleased to meet with **EU Commissioner for Internal Affairs and Migration, Magnus Brunner**. We [discussed](#) the implementation of the **Pact on Migration and Asylum**, including the revised EU Asylum Procedures Regulation. We agreed that a human rights-based approach to migration management was a common interest. We exchanged on the broader situation in the Middle East, and more specifically the cases of **Syria, Egypt, Libya** and **Tunisia**.

On the occasion of the **International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination** on 21 March, I aligned myself with the [statement of the High Representative](#), emphasizing the need to unequivocally reject all forms of racial discrimination. The issue of racial discrimination has been a particularly important topic in my interactions with the African Union.

During my mission to the US, in exchanges with **U.S. Special Envoy to Monitor and Combat Antisemitism, Ambassador Rabbi Yehuda Kaploun**, and the **Deputy Adviser for International Religious Freedom** we addressed our respective action on freedom of religion and belief and protection of religious minorities. In Europe, we have learned from our history the importance of preventing incitement to hatred through hate speech and xenophobia.

I warmly welcome the European Commission's designation of **Mairead McGuinness** as the **new Special Envoy for Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB) outside the EU**. Protecting the ability of every individual to decide what they believe (or do not believe) is one of the most fundamental aspects of human dignity, closely connected to the freedom of expression. I stand ready to work closely with the Special Envoy to advance this essential priority. In our current global reality, where religion is increasingly instrumentalised for political purposes, even for repression, rather than serving as a positive force for peace and tolerance, defending the freedom of religion or belief and protecting persecuted minorities is more vital than ever to promote open and inclusive societies.

## **LOOKING AHEAD**

In an attempt to meet with both internal and external actors in Brussels, I will spend most of April in my duty station. I look forward to engaging with business representatives to exchange on business and human rights. I will also hold a European Seminar at the University of Leiden. At the end of the month, I will embark on a mission to Ethiopia, with a focus on transitional justice and accountability.

*Kajsa Ollongren*

*EU Special Representative for Human Rights*

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