



EUSR for Human Rights – Newsletter - March 2024

I have just concluded my first month as the EU Special Representative for Human Rights. It is an important job at critical time. I have much appreciated the many initial conversations with colleagues in the EU institutions, international organisations, representatives of third countries and civil society on how to protect and promote human rights (HR) and the respect for International Humanitarian Law (IHL) in the face of some very severe global challenges. Respect for human rights and IHL is challenged around the world. And our joint ability to reverse the trend is being tested. It is my conviction that human rights need to be central in all our foreign policy ambitions – the same way they apply in our domestic agendas. The world in many ways expect us to be the main advocate for these universal rights and the EU sits on some very formidable instruments to pursue them. I am encouraged that many countries in the world are looking to deepen the cooperation with us both politically and economically. I will prioritize engagement where real change is possible.

I have been asked to immediately engage on the situation in the **OPT/WB and Gaza**. I have met with freed Israeli hostages who described the horrific ordeal they have gone through. I have also held conversations with UNRWA representatives, who explained the immense difficulties and hurdles imposed for assisting the civilian population in Gaza. I have been approached by Israeli NGOs gathering evidence on the detention conditions of Palestinians in Israel. Allegations of very serious violations of human rights and IHL needs to be addressed. Accountability remains central to the protection of human rights everywhere. I will remain very actively engaged.

I have held initial discussions with **Ethiopian** representatives on the key issue of Transitional Justice. Accountability following the massive suffering of civilians in the war remains crucial for the victims and survivors, for lasting peace and reconciliation and indeed for enhancing cooperation with the EU. There is a readiness for EU to support this effort once a quality Policy Framework is in place – which we hope is very soon.

I have discussed with **Egyptian** Representatives ways to pursue the human rights agenda as part of our relations including under the newly signed Strategic and Comprehensive Agreement, which foresees “credible steps towards democracy, rule of law and respect for human rights”. I look very much forward to engaging further.

I have reached out to the Government of **the Gambia** to express my concerns with the ongoing attempts in the Gambian Parliament to weaken protection against female genital mutilation by repealing existing laws. The Gambia has been a solid partner on accountability and human rights and the Government remains committed and is trying to counter this negative effort by some conservative lawmakers.

My first visit to Africa in this position will be to the Conference in **Cabo Verde** Freedom, Democracy and Good Governance in early April. This is as a way to demonstrate our support to a country clearly intent on moving ahead with democratic governance. There will be opportunities to meet with other African senior leaders representing countries with firm democratic aspirations.

I received the Minister of Foreign Affairs of **Turkmenistan**, Rashid Meredov, during his visit to Brussels. We discussed the importance of human rights in the relationship between the EU and Turkmenistan. Central Asia will remain high on my agenda where I will be looking at options for a deeper engagement on human rights.

The **multilateral system** is challenged, not least by the undermining tactics and behaviour of countries like Russia. We see the system as fundamental to upholding global rules and norms and advancing new ones. It is vital that they deliver on expectations of peoples around the world, not least in protecting international law and the broader human rights agenda both political, economic and social. It is a central part of my mandate to engage very actively with these institution. I have already met with the many **multilateral partners** visiting Brussels, such as **the Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict** and the **UN Assistant Secretary-General for Human Rights**. I am planning early visits to **Geneva**, The Hague and **New York**. I have engaged with the **ILO** and met separately with the **OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities**. I have discussed with the President for the **ICRC** the fallout from modern warfare including cyber and remote weapons - requiring new frontiers in the laws that govern how wars are conducted in order to protect civilians.

Civil society remain a fundamental buildingblock in any democratic society and a key partner in the fulfilment of my mandate. I received a number of appeals and demarches from organizations and individuals on various situations around the world. Among the many appeals that reach my office are numerous reports of violations by the **Myanmar** junta against civilians, over the **Kyrgyz** legislation limiting civic space, over the crackdown on Tibetans peacefully protesting against the construction of a dam, or over the recent announcement of rules to implement the Citizenship Amendment Act in **India** and their impact on the Muslim minority, among many other issues. Many also turned to me on individual cases, old and new, including, the Chinese human rights defender, Shunli, arrested 10 years ago while attempting to travel to Geneva and who shortly afterwards died in detention. I sat down to hear a testimony from the daughter of Dr Gubad Ibadoglu whom the EU has called on Azerbaijan to release. Behind every human right violation there is a fate of a courageous individual. The list of abuse is very long and new cases are added daily. It is impossible to comment on all of them. But the effort to improve their fate will not end.

The situation in **Ukraine** is an endless onslaught and in flagrante violation of the most fundamental principles of international law – including non-aggression and the right to life. There is plenty of work being carried out every day to collect evidence of the long list of crimes committed by Russia. I will devote plenty of time to support accountability efforts there including through the human rights dialogue in Kiev that will take place in April.

Olof Skoog
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