



## EUSR for Human Rights – Newsletter – January 2025

The year began in turmoil for many people around the world. Russia's onslaught on the people of **Ukraine** continued unabated. **Georgian** authorities fiercely clamped down on peaceful demonstrators. In **Belarus**, we witnessed staged Soviet-style sham elections that bore no proof of credibility. In **Sudan**, the humanitarian toll continued to increase as the warring sides manifest utter disregard for the fundamental principles of international humanitarian law (IHL). M23's military campaign in the eastern provinces of the **Democratic Republic of Congo** (DRC) has killed many, including soldiers carrying the UN emblem deployed to keep the peace and protect civilians, and has led to the displacement of hundreds of thousands.

A new **Administration was inaugurated in Washington**. Early decisions, including those to leave the Paris Agreement, defund the World Health Organization (WHO) as well as to freeze many programmes in support of people and organizations defending human rights and democracy around the world, will have inevitable and immediate effects. A **Chinese artificial intelligence tool** has entered the world raising legitimate questions of whether a human centred cyber sphere with adequate monitoring mechanisms can be maintained.

But there are also positives. The **ceasefire in Gaza** has brought hostages and prisoners back, and some relief for the population in Gaza. In **Lebanon**, the new Government comes in with strong credentials. The people of Syria are better off than just a few months ago.

There is no question that the **EU** needs to remain a voice of civility and an arduous defender of human rights, justice and the rule of law in a global context where universal norms and rights are often trampled upon. If there is a silver lining in all this, it may be that many countries around the world still unite behind the fundamental tenets of international law, the universality of human rights and well-functioning global systems based on the UN Charter and established norms and agreements. I bring that positive notion into my **new role as the Deputy Secretary General for Political Affairs** in the European External Action Service (EEAS) that I have been asked to take on as of 1 March.

### RECENT EVENTS

In the eastern provinces of the **Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC)**, internally displaced persons are being caught between combatants and are trying to flee the occupied cities. Dead bodies are mounting in the streets, as explosive weapons continue to be used in densely populated areas with absolute disregard for IHL. Humanitarian aid and humanitarian access are hindered, with airports and other civilian infrastructure blocked or destroyed. There are reports of sexual violence as well as mass and summary executions. In this regard, the EU will consider all the tools at its disposal in order to support the peace efforts and prevent the worsening of the humanitarian crisis. As is so often the case, children are the worst affected.

Since the ceasefire in **Gaza**, we have witnessed an alarming uptick of violence in the **West Bank**. The order of the Israeli government to close and vacate the **UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA)** premises in occupied East Jerusalem took effect on 30 January, causing further concern for Palestinians, humanitarian actors and, indeed, major donors such as the EU.

In **Lebanon**, while the ceasefire has been extended until 18 February, human rights violations – including against returning civilians - have been reported, and thousands continue to be displaced. A permanent end to the hostilities is needed, paired with recovery and reconstruction.

In the context of the transition in **Syria**, the importance of human rights, accountability, transitional justice, civil society participation and the inclusion of all components of Syrian society remain important. In February, I will also engage with the UN accountability and humanitarian mechanisms. The commitment of the interim authorities to meet with the families of missing persons is a positive step.

In January, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights **Volker Türk** paid a visit to Brussels, meeting the EU's new leadership and the European Parliament. The High Commissioner praised the EU's role in promoting online civic space and called upon the EU to continue to champion the protection of the rights of migrants and refugees in an ever more difficult international context, two central themes in our ongoing broad exchanges. Our recently adopted **Council Conclusions on EU priorities in UN Human Rights Fora 2025** clearly set out a continued ambitious and responsible role for ourselves.

## BILATERAL ENGAGEMENT

This month, I travelled to **Pakistan** to exchange on the country's human rights commitments, including under the **Generalized Scheme of Preferences Plus** (GSP+) for trade, and instil a sense of urgency for the government to act. There are steps to be taken in order to reverse issues of concern.

I was well received in Pakistan, and had frank and open conversations at the highest level with key ministers. In Islamabad, I met with Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister **Ishaq Dar**, Minister of Law, Justice and Human Rights **Azam Nazeer Tarar**, Federal Minister Commerce **Jam Kamal Khan**, and Chief Justice **Yahya Afridi**. I had a robust exchange with the military leadership in Rawalpindi. In Lahore, I met with Punjab Chief Minister **Maryam Nawaz Sharif** and Minister for Minorities in Punjab, **Sardar Ramesh Singh Arora**. It was encouraging to see how vibrant Pakistani civil society is and exchange with many dedicated people – human rights defenders, independent journalists, human rights lawyers, and trade unionists.

Across my meetings with the government, I focused on critical issues, namely freedom of religion or belief, including the new phenomenon of “blasphemy business scams”; enforced disappearances; death penalty; women's rights, including forced marriage and conversions; freedom of expression and independence of the media; accountability; due process and the right to a fair trial. I presented several concrete steps in the next few months – based on the country's own commitments – that would have some positive impact in the context of the ongoing GSP+ assessment. I also advised that Pakistan work closely with the United Nations system, in order to ensure that legislation and the country's implementation of international obligations and commitments fulfil highest standards in areas such as criminal justice, labour conditions and refugees. I raised individual cases such as that of **Junaid Hafeez**, jailed since 2013 on blasphemy charges. A press release of my mission can be found [here](#).

This year will see further intensification of the EU's cooperation with **Central Asian states**. I see this as an important opportunity to identify what more the two regions can do together to defend the international human rights architecture, and to offer support to help the Central Asian states meet their international and national obligations on human rights. To this end, in January, I had a very good first meeting with the **Ambassador of Kazakhstan to the EU, Margulan Baimukhan**. The EU-Kazakhstan partnership continues to deepen and I look forward to exploring how it can translate into further cooperation on human rights, including on the eradication of torture.

In January, I also had the pleasure of meeting the Ambassador of **Trinidad and Tobago to the EU, Colin Connelly**. Trinidad and Tobago is a staunch supporter of the International Criminal Court, and was driving force for achieving the Pact for the Future, which revitalized multilateral cooperation and we shared the assessment of the value of exploring closer cooperation between the EU and the Caribbean. As several other countries in the Caribbean, Trinidad and Tobago sees the benefit of drawing upon the UN Human Rights system, through presence of human rights advisors to advance human rights domestically. This is not least evident through the regionally-led initiative to establish the recently opening of a UN Human Rights Office for the Caribbean, with which my office has had several exchanges.

## **INTERNATIONAL HUMANITARIAN LAW AND ACCOUNTABILITY**

Reflections are ongoing on how to reinforce respect for IHL by all. In this context, I had an insightful and timely conversation with **Geneva Call Executive Director, Alain Deletroz**. With 210 million people currently living in areas controlled by armed groups and *de facto* authorities (AGDAs), the organisation's dedication to disseminating IHL and promoting respect for its rules by AGDAs is commendable. We discussed the vital connection between respect for IHL and the safeguarding and advancement of human rights in conflict-affected contexts. Through its direct engagement with AGDAs, Geneva Call has proven to contribute to increased awareness of and respect for IHL in a number of contexts, including possibly during December 2024 offensive that led to regime change in Syria.

However, we cannot overlook the alarming reports of **IHL violations by States' armed forces themselves**. Crimes committed by one party do not justify crimes by the other. Not only can disrespect of the rules of IHL by one party not lawfully legitimise violations by the other, it can also have a damaging impact, undermining IHL tenets and creating a downward spiral of non-compliance.

**Accountability** for grave human rights violations and breaches of IHL can act as a deterrent, preventing further and future violations. The EU is hence wholly committed to fighting against impunity and to promote international criminal law and justice. ICC remains central to this effort. In January, we commemorated the **80<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz**, which reminds us that all perpetrators of war crimes and genocide must be brought to justice

In the past few years and months, repeated attacks (including cyber) and threats (including of sanctions) against the **International Criminal Court (ICC)**, by Russia among others, have not only affected designated ICC staff and the Court itself, but thousands of individuals – including victims and witnesses - around the world, who benefit from the protection of the Court. They risk affecting the functioning of the Court at large, jeopardising the Prosecutor's investigations, and hampering the Court's support to and cooperation with national authorities and other accountability mechanisms. The EU, and its Member States, have consistently recommitted themselves to supporting the ICC and defending it from any attempts aimed at obstructing the course of justice. In line with the EU's founding values and as States Parties to the Rome Statute, all EU Members have committed to protect the integrity of the Court.

## **CIVIC SPACE, HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS AND POLITICAL PRISONERS**

In the South Caucasus, democratic decline in **Georgia** continued with the use of violence against protestors, media representatives and politicians. Such actions are not acceptable for an EU candidate country, and stand in violation of Georgia's human rights obligations including as a member state of the Council of Europe. I welcome the efforts of the Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights, **Michael O'Flaherty**, who visited Georgia in January to address the most pressing human rights issues.

My office receives a lot of information on pressing individual cases from many parts of the world. This month we learned about the prison sentences issued in January in **Azerbaijan** against human rights defenders **Bakhtiyar Hajiyev, Rail Abbasov** and **Ilhamiz Guliyev**, Kanal 11 journalist **Teymur Karimov** and trade unionist **Afiyaddin Mammadov**.

In **Russia**, January saw a further deterioration of the human rights situation, as exemplified by the outrageous prison sentences for **Alexei Navalny's lawyers**, which serve to weaken the legal community in Russia. The new law on blogger registries further curtails the freedom of expression.

On a more positive note was the announcement by the Cuban **President Díaz-Canel** that 553 prisoners, including political prisoners, would be released, which partially answers a long-standing call from the EU. I was relieved to hear that many of the political prisoners that the EU has had a close engagement on, including **Jose Daniel Ferrer** mentioned in my previous newsletter, are now free and able to reunite with their families. We expect the Cuban authorities to abide by their commitments and to follow through with remaining releases. We also expect to see progress on the agreements made in the framework of the last Human Rights Dialogue held in February 2023.

The situation of human rights defenders in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region continues to be alarming. On 28 January, the pre-trial detention of **Sinem Bensedrine**, former Chair of **Tunisia's Truth and Dignity Commission**, was extended. Her detention continues despite her rapidly deteriorating health; while she ended her hunger strike on 30 January due the risks to her health. We continue to closely monitor her case, and I urge the authorities to release her the soonest.

Another case brought to my attention is that of Egyptian-Turkish poet, columnist and media figure **Abdulrahman Youssef Al-Qaradawi**, missing in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) since 8 January, following his extradition from Lebanon. I have had further opportunities to discuss the situation in **Egypt**, including this month with the **Foreign Minister** and the **Egyptian Ambassador in Brussels**, I continue to recount the recommendations from my November mission, including on individual cases as well as the importance of the freedom of speech and media. During this spring, the European Parliament will look into the second tranche of the macro-financial assistance package to Egypt, including the human rights aspects.

I was informed that after the human rights dialogue with **Saudi Arabia** in December, the sentences of two human rights defenders were reduced. Yet the spike in the use of the death penalty for non-lethal and drug-related crimes seem to continue.

## **FREEDOM OF RELIGION AND BELIEF**

This month I participated in a meeting with the Religion and Diplomacy Advisors of EU member states, with whom we discussed how to improve EU's engagement on **Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB)**. Religion is an extremely important part of the human rights agenda, as positive religious values have an immense potential to promote mutual respect, tolerance and peaceful coexistence. In this regard, I have shared some impression on FoRB issues from my recent missions to **Kenya, The Gambia, Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Pakistan**. Unfortunately, religion is far too often (mis)used in the persecution of individuals for religion or belief – something that plagues all continents. For example, this month, my Office has received worrying reports of persecution of Catholic priests and nuns in **Nicaragua**. In **Pakistan**, I had elaborate meetings with both the Catholic Church and the Ahmadi community in Lahore – two communities exercising their faith under severe strains, attacks and restrictions.

## **LOOKING AHEAD**

In February, I will conduct a mission to **Guatemala**, where the EU is heavily invested in democratic development through electoral observation, development cooperation and our human rights sanctions regime. Some of the areas that I will focus on are the rights of indigenous peoples, the protection of human rights defenders, journalist and justice operators, as well as the important role of business actors in relation to democracy and human rights. I will also represent the EU during the Human Rights Council high-level segment, and have the opportunity to speak to all EU Ambassadors around the world about human rights when they convene in Brussels for the annual Ambassadors Conference during the first week of February.

*Olof Skoog*

*EU Special Representative for Human Rights*

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