



**Commemoration of the 70th Anniversary of
the World Federation of United Nations Associations**

The United Nations and WFUNA:

Celebrating 70 years of partnership and looking forward

**“The scope and relevance of human rights in the age of the UN sustainable
development goals”**

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Distinguished guests,

Allow me to begin by thanking Mr André Rollinger and all the members and volunteers of the *Association luxembourgeoise pour les Nations Unies* for hosting the commemoration of the 70th anniversary of the World Federation of United Nations Associations. Let me also wholeheartedly welcome Mr Bonian Golmohammadi, Secretary-General of the World Federation of United Nations Associations and Ms Deborah Seward, Director of the United Nations Regional Information Centre in Brussels.

For Luxembourg, it is an honour and a matter of national pride that the World Federation of UN Associations was founded in our country on 2 August 1946. Luxembourg has been a proud and active founding member of the United Nations since the entry into force of the Charter of the UN in October 1945. As we all know in this room, the preamble of the Charter begins with the comprehensive opening words of “We the peoples of the United Nations”: this is an organisation that aims to be truly global and universal. It is therefore only normal that this founding aspiration would be taken up by a global network of Associations for the United Nations.

In my remarks to you today, I will address “the scope and relevance of human rights in the age of the UN sustainable development goals”. For this, I will first point out that human rights are intertwined throughout the SDGs, as a condition to protect human dignity. Human Rights and development are inseparable priorities. I will then address three grave threats to the international rules-based order; finally, I will attempt to end on a note of optimism.

Ladies and gentlemen,

After the unprecedented global consensus on the Millennium Development Goals in the year 2000, we have now gone one step further with the adoption of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the Agenda 2030 for Sustainable Development. The new Agenda builds on the success of the MDGs but aims to complete its unfinished business and end poverty in all its forms.

The 2030 Agenda is universal: it applies to all countries and all peoples. It recognizes the need for the economic, social and environmental dimension to go hand in hand in order to achieve sustainable development and ending poverty, while tackling climate change. The 17 SDGs and 169 targets cover a wide range of actions to that effect, which largely reflect the human rights framework. Human rights are indeed at the core of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, starting by its preamble, which anchors the Agenda in the international human rights framework and states that the SDGs aim to “realize the human rights of all”.

Let me remind you of former Secretary-General Kofi Annan's saying, by which the **interdependence between the three pillars of the UN** was recognized:

Quote "There will be no development without security, and no security without development. And both development and security also depend on respect for human rights and the rule of law." Unquote

This understanding is at the heart of the Sustainable Development Goals.

Goal 16 in particular is dedicated to the realization of peaceful and inclusive societies, by focusing on civil and political rights, access to justice and respect for fundamental freedoms.

There is no competition between the development aspect and the human rights aspect of the Agenda 2030: rather, they are mutually reinforcing, creating thus the conditions for peaceful and inclusive societies. Central to this understanding is the universality of the Agenda 2030: it applies not only to developing countries, as did the MDGs, but also to the developed countries. This is a Transformational Agenda for all human societies: a common moral and developmental undertaking, to lead us away from the inequalities that divide our nations, towards a world where no one is left behind, "to promote social progress and better standards of life in larger freedom", to quote again from the preamble of the Charter of the United Nations.

Some of the characteristics of human rights can also be applied to the Agenda 2030.

Let me elaborate:

- First: Human Rights are **universal**: they are for all people, in all countries, at all times. This is the stated priority also for the Sustainable Development Goals.
- Second: They are **indivisible**: all rights are important and it would be wrong to uphold only some rights, to the detriment of others. In fact, Article 30 of the Universal Declaration specifically prohibits this. There is a false dichotomy between civil and political rights, on the one hand, and economic, social, and cultural rights on the other hand. The most fundamental of all rights is what Hannah Arendt calls “the right to have rights.”
- Third: They are **interdependent and interrelated**
- Fourth: They are **inalienable**: nobody has the right to take any rights away. Under our human rights system, human beings are right-holders and states are duty-bearers. Of course, this is difficult to understand for authoritarian rulers and people with an authoritarian mind-set.

The world has never been as prosperous as today. New and emerging technologies are spreading around with remarkable speed and ease; many of them hold the promise of greater socio-economic development for an ever greater number of people. And yet, a seemingly ever greater number of people feel left behind by globalisation. After the vague certainties given to us by the Enlightenment and the last industrial revolution, it seems that humanity is

now, once again, entering uncharted territory, worrying to those who live in uncertainty.

We have the laws, rules, and norms necessary to make national and international society work, yet we seem unwilling to apply them. The UN's human rights system, anchored in the UN Charter and built on the foundation of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, offers powerful guidance for the creation of peaceful, just, and inclusive societies. At the same time, we see the emergence of threats not only to our environment, our security, or our economies, but rather to the very foundations on which this system of rights and norms is built.

In 2016, the world is facing a complex set of security, environmental and developmental threats, each solvable on their own, but compounded by their interrelation, as well as by sometimes unhelpful politics.

The complex challenges of wars and conflicts, poverty, economic and income inequality, organised and interpersonal violence, racism, sexism, climate change, environmental degradation, large population movements, or actual existential threats, like nuclear weapons, can seem overwhelming. Though we are not powerless against these challenges and threats, our inability to agree on the best way to tackle them makes us waste precious time and resources.

Let me list three dangerous tendencies in our current time:

The first of these is a global crackdown on civil and political rights, translated notably into violent repression against human rights defenders.

The case of Berta Caceres, a human rights defender and environmental activist in Honduras, murdered on 3rd March 2016, has stirred passions around the globe. But there are thousands more like her, in dozens of countries around the world. Human rights defenders advocating for labour rights, or sexual and reproductive health rights, or investigating cases of grand corruption, links between politics and organised crime, or environmental destruction: they all face threats to their freedom, physical integrity, and even their lives. They all need to be protected.

Yet the civil and political space in which they act is becoming increasingly limited and constrained by new laws, which forbid the financing of NGOs or limit fundamental freedoms. This is a dangerous global tendency, often underlined by the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Prince Zeid Al Hussein. In his opening statement to the 33rd Session of the Human Rights Council, High-Commissioner Zeid addressed the refusal of many states to grant access to his Office, to countries generally, or to specific regions.

The false interpretation that such states make of national sovereignty – namely that they can violate human rights and human dignity as they please – is a fallacy and a danger to the international order itself. In view of Luxembourg's candidacy for the Human Rights Council, we will pay even more attention to the situation of human rights defenders and civil society space, both of which are indispensable for the fulfilment of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

There is a second dangerous tendency, which is the undermining of international law, in particular international humanitarian law – also known as “the law of war”.

The relentless bombardment of Syrian opposition-held areas, more specifically in eastern Aleppo, by the regime of Bashar Al-Assad, with the active support of Russia, is an active attempt to undermine international humanitarian law. Syria and Russia have previously flouted the laws of war, notably by bombing a UN aid convoy last month, which was operated by the Syrian Red Crescent. A similar fundamental disregard for international humanitarian law can also be seen in the bombing campaign led by Saudi Arabia and its allies in Yemen. When evidence of the use of chemical weapons by the Assad regime in Syria came to light in 2013, there was global shock and outrage; yet chemical weapons continue to be used in Syria and elsewhere. A recent inquiry by Amnesty International found shocking evidence that chemical weapons were used against hundreds of civilians in the Darfur region of Sudan. There is already an international arrest warrant by the International Criminal Court for Sudan’s President Omar al-Bashir. Unfortunately, numerous countries around the world have refused to cooperate with the Court and serve the warrant.

The International Criminal Court, which has the full support of Luxembourg and a large number of other countries, is under threat from different sides. The recent vote by the Parliament of Burundi to withdraw from the Court is a cynical move designed to protect a political regime which has overstayed its elected mandate and is violating the human rights of its entire population. Other African heads of state appear to have sympathy for a collective withdrawal from the Rome Statute, under the pretext that the Court is

targeting African countries unfairly and exclusively. I would admit that this is dangerous for the international order and for the concept of justice itself. I would counter this narrative by stating first that the Court examines those situations brought to it by countries themselves and by the UN Security Council; and second, there are a number of preliminary examinations outside Africa, namely in Afghanistan, Colombia, Iraq / United Kingdom, Palestine and Ukraine.

A number of states – too many to mention here – also undermine international human rights, notably in the Human Rights Council itself. They refuse to cooperate with the Office of the High-Commissioner and with other Special Procedures; they call into question the independence of the UN's independent experts and attempt to oppose their investigations. All of this is done in the name of sovereignty and non-interference into the internal affairs of states. While these are holy principles in international law and consecrated by the UN Charter, their abuse for the purpose of fortifying authoritarian regimes undermines the entire system.

Finally, another dangerous tendency we observe closer to home is **authoritarian nationalism**.

Many people in today's world do not seem to share our conviction that there are universal rights; that all people, everywhere, hold these rights; and that all states, in all circumstances, must uphold and protect these rights. They refuse that some people, like refugees, could lay a claim to these rights. Rather than open their borders, they insist on erecting walls and keeping fellow human beings outside – to drown in the Mediterranean, to fall prey to human

trafficking, to freeze to death outside barbed-wire fences, or to be parked in refugee camps, with no hope for a better life for their children and themselves.

Please do not misunderstand me: the large movements of migrants and refugees that we see today are a significant challenge for all of us. But we should not forget that the neighbouring countries of Syria, but also of South Sudan, of Somalia, or Afghanistan bear a much larger burden than Europe. We must stop treating this situation as a crisis that we can simply wish away. This is the “new normal” in an interdependent world, where we feel the ripple effects of the conflicts, repression, and corruption, even though it may happen on a different continent.

Rather than listen to the short-sighted populists and right-wing extremists that call upon us to close our borders and our hearts, we should rise to the challenge. Some of you might know that I have publically called out the despicable and xenophobic policies and statements that one can hear even inside the European Union. Such inflaming and divisive rhetoric has no place in the EU of the 21st century. And yet, it is hardly an isolated case; in the USA, in the Philippines, in neighbouring France: there are numerous political leaders or candidates who thrive on uncertainty and prey on their citizens’ fears. They must not triumph and impose their Manichean world-view.

Here, the Agenda 2030, and in particular its goal 16, aiming for the creation of peaceful, just, and inclusive societies, provides a powerful antidote to hate and division. All we must do is rise to the numerous challenges that are facing us.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Let me finish by a touch of optimism and hope. **Antonio Guterres** will be the next Secretary-General of the United Nations. There are two reasons why I'm confident and why I believe that the appointment of Antonio Guterres as new Secretary-General is a reason for optimism.

Antonio Guterres is not only a great friend of Luxembourg, but first and foremost, he is a champion for all humanity. As High Commissioner for Refugees, he witnessed first-hand the suffering of the most vulnerable people on earth. He witnessed what can happen to the dignity and worth of the human person. He has pledged to make human dignity the core principle of our common action. He knows how to best bring about the transformation envisaged by the 2030 Agenda.

Expectations are understandably high. Antonio Guterres was chosen through a more transparent process than ever before and numerous UN Associations have helped in this. Unfortunately, being a woman isn't one of his many qualities, but I am confident that he is perfectly qualified for this job, which the first Secretary-General, Trygve Lie, described as "the most impossible job on earth" to his successor, Dag Hammarskjöld.

Later, before laying down his own life in the service of the ideals of the United Nations, Dag Hammarskjöld would find a way to encapsulate the essence of what it means to be an effective UN Secretary-General: the ability to speak truth to power. He wrote:

“Never, “for the sake of peace and quiet,” deny your own experience or convictions.”

And here is the second reason why I’m optimistic: like Hammarskjöld before him, Antonio Guterres has a proven track record of speaking the truth to power. This will not only make him friends, but it will make him the person we need for the fulfilment of the interrelated promise of international peace and security, sustainable development and universal human rights.

Ladies and gentlemen,

As you know, Luxembourg is a strong believer in the international rules-based order. We have always played our part in protecting universal human rights, preserving international peace and security, and furthering socio-economic development for all. I no longer need to remind you of our enduring commitment to provide 1% of our gross national income as Official Development Assistance. It is our longstanding commitment to development, motivated by the will to show solidarity with the poorest, conscious of our international responsibilities. For many years now, Luxembourg belongs to the small group of countries devoting at least 0,7% of the GNI to development cooperation. This effort opens up perspectives for the generations to come, giving them opportunities and thus, hopefully, prevent conflicts

Luxembourg was an active non-permanent member of the UN Security Council in 2013 and 2014. Commitment, solidarity, responsibility were the three key words that guided our country and will continue to guide our policy at the UN.

During its mandate, Luxembourg devoted its undivided attention to the root causes of conflicts, to their humanitarian and economic impact as well as to human rights, in particular the rights of children affected by conflict.

It is with the same sets of goals that the government decided to launch its candidacy for a seat at the Human Rights Council for the period 2022-2024. Based on its experience, Luxembourg has worked hard to show that it is worthy of the honour bestowed upon it by the General Assembly when it was elected to the Security Council. It is the government's strongest attention to continue its work and to serve the United Nations to uphold the common values, the values of humanity.

Thank you for your attention.