SPECIAL PROCEDURES
UNITED NATIONS
HUMAN RIGHTS COUNCIL

Unilateral coercive measures are illegal under international law and shall be lifted: UN Experts Mark First International Day Against UCMs

[4 December 2025]

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GENEVA (4 December 2025) – On 16 June 2025 the UN General Assembly adopted resolution 79/193 and proclaimed 4 December as the International Day against Unilateral Coercive Measures, to be observed annually, beginning in 2025.

Proliferation of unilateral coercive measures (UCMs), means of their enforcement and consequent over-compliance has tremendous effect on the enjoyment of all human rights. UCMs negatively affect the import and export of all types of essential goods and services, including food products, medicines, medical equipment and spare parts; disrupt agricultural supply chains; impede financial and insurance transactions for humanitarian needs; limit international cooperation and humanitarian assistance and response; result in economic hardships, inflation, currency devaluation; undermine capacity of states to maintain critical infrastructure, provide social assistance and ensure the whole scope of human rights.

Marginalized and vulnerable communities and persons, including women, older persons, persons with disability or those suffering from rare and severe deceases and children are particularly at risk of being affected and of being left behind.

Critical infrastructure and goods including healthcare, food, education, electricity generation, access to clean water and sanitation, agricultural processing, transportation, telecommunications and production of pharmaceuticals is often affected, despite formal existence of humanitarian exemptions, due to the impossibility or impediments for buying new equipment, spare parts to repair used or obsolescent equipment, and components for equipment maintenance by the sanctioned states.

These negative consequences are compounded by the increase in complex emergencies around the world, linked to environmental degradation, climate, and the multiplications of wars and conflicts.

Sanctioning actors extend their jurisdiction beyond the national borders and develop numerous punitive means of enforcement including secondary sanctions, civil and criminal penalties for circumvention of unilateral sanctions regimes, customs freezes, qualification of states as sponsors of terrorism, threats, reputational risks for states, companies and individuals, which constitutes an abuse of rights and establishes the atmosphere of “fear” of secondary sanctions and civil and criminal penalties, provoking extensive overcompliance and zero risk policies, exacerbating humanitarian crises.

Mechanisms such as the Financial Action Task Force grey-listing and black-listing processes, operating outside the UN framework and without adequate procedural safeguards, also function as coercive instruments that disproportionately burden

developing countries; trigger de-risking by financial institutions resulting in exclusion from correspondent banking relationships; disrupt remittance corridors critical for vulnerable populations; increase transaction costs for essential goods and services; and impede humanitarian transfers, with consequences indistinguishable from those of unilateral sanctions.

Humanitarian exemptions and carve-outs are, in practice, ineffective and inefficient, generating major consequences for states facing humanitarian crises, specifically impacting the most vulnerable groups, impeding humanitarian action and creating compounded risks for donors and humanitarian organizations in violation of principles of humanitarian action set forth in the General Assembly resolution 46/182.

We underline that unilateral coercive measures are illegal under international law. They violate core principles set forth in the UN Charter, such as the principle of sovereign equality, non-intervention into domestic affairs, principle of the respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. They impede economic growth and full achievement of Sustainable Development Goals, disproportionately affecting least developed and developing countries. Such measures undermine basic human rights such as the right to life, the right to dignity, the right of everyone to the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health and medical care, the right to freedom from hunger and the right to an adequate standard of living, food, education, work and housing, as well as the right to development and the right to a clean, health and sustainable environment etc.

Despite the fact that access to justice is a core human right, the victims of sanctions' policies often lack full access to an effective remedy due to multiple reasons, including violations of due process and fair trial guarantees; financial restrictions, which impede financial support and payment of legal fees; lack of transparency in sanctions-designation procedures; limited access to legal aid in sanctions-related cases. Sanctioning states usually deny any humanitarian consequences of their actions, shifting responsibility for the sanctioned states themselves or other actors.

We underline that all measures taken unilaterally without or beyond the authorization of the UN Security Council and which violate international treaty or customary norms of international law in force between sanctioning states or states under sanctions in any sphere, and wrongfulness of which cannot be excluded as countermeasures in accordance with the law of international responsibility, must be lifted. Measures taken to enforce or implement UCMs are equally illegal.

All actors shall be held responsible for violations of international law and human rights that may result from the adoption, enforcement of or compliance with UCMs, and from over-compliance with any form of unilateral sanctions by private actors under their jurisdiction or control. Provisions of national law of sanctioning States cannot be invoked to avoid responsibility under international law and/or liability for damages thereof.

We also urge the States affected by UCMs, civil society, research institutes, companies and individuals whose rights are violated by unilateral sanctions to engage with the Monitoring and impact assessment of impact of such measured on human rights to document violations, prepare reports on the negative impact of unilateral sanctions on

specific human rights and/or vulnerable groups, advocate for victims of human rights violations resulting from unilateral coercive measures, and promote accountability for those responsible.

The Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, United Nations treaty bodies, other United Nations organs and Specialized agencies should monitor impact of UCMs, means of their enforcement and over-compliance within the scope of their mandate and take measures necessary to ensure that human rights of affected people are properly protected, right to effective remedy is implemented and humanitarian action takes place in accordance with the agreed principles.

ENDS

The experts:

***Alena Douhan**, Special Rapporteur on the negative impact of the unilateral coercive measures on the enjoyment of human rights;*

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