SPECIAL PROCEDURES
UNITED NATIONS
HUMAN RIGHTS COUNCIL

**Statement on the UN80 Initiative by Ms. Reem Alsalem, Special Rapporteur on violence against women and girls, its causes and consequences; and Ms. Attiya Waris, Independent Expert on foreign debt, other international financial obligations and human rights ***

*In the following statement Ms. Reem Alsalem, Special Rapporteur on violence against women and girls, its causes and consequences; and Ms. Attiya Waris, Independent Expert on debt, other international financial obligations and human rights, make specific proposals regarding intended reforms under the UN80 Initiative on how to strengthen the special procedures of the Human Rights Council, and the engagement and support provided by the United Nations and its different organs to special procedures. The proposals were sent to the attention of the Secretary General in a letter dated 8 August 2025, with copies to the President of the General Assembly, the President of the Human Rights Council and the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights.*

*Ms. Alsalem and Ms. Waris are making these proposals in their individual capacity and not on behalf of other special procedures mandate holders*.

The UN80 Initiative launched in March 2025 as a comprehensive reform effort to make the United Nations more effective, efficient, and responsive as it approaches its 80th anniversary in 2025. The initiative responds to global challenges, including funding cuts, geopolitical tensions, and a perceived decline in multilateral trust, while aiming to align the UN with the needs of the 21st century. The initiative reportedly builds on prior reform efforts like the Pact for the Future and UN 2.0, which focus on modernizing the UN for contemporary challenges. As the UN Secretary General has emphasized, the UN80 Initiative is not solely about cost-cutting but about "better serving people whose very lives depend on us" and ensuring value for taxpayers globally.

The UN faces a liquidity crisis, with only $1.8 billion of the $3.5 billion 2025 regular budget assessments received by 30 April 2025, and significant arrears from several Member States. Additional pressures include reduced humanitarian aid funding and rising global challenges like conflicts, poverty, and climate crises. The initiative also addresses criticisms of inefficiency and fragmentation within the UN system.

We understand that the UN80 Initiative is structured around three main areas of focus, each addressing different aspects of reform: The Secretary-General appointed a dedicated UN80 task force to elaborate reform proposals across the following three key areas: a) Identifying in the management and operations of the United Nations Secretariat, and the System as a whole; b) reviewing the resolutions and source documents to

streamline delivery, reduce duplications and increase impact; and c) exploring the potential introduction of changes to the architecture of the UN system across the organization's pillars of peace and security, development, and human rights and realigning programmes across entities. The proposals include merging agencies.

**Safeguarding the integrity, independence and impartiality of special procedures**

The strength and credibility of the special procedures are rooted in their expertise, as well as their independence, and impartiality – including from the United Nations itself. In this regard, it would be opportune to take stock of the current configuration, where the United Nations (specifically the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights) provides secretarial support to the special procedures in the exercise of their functions. Considering the impact that the financial crisis of the United Nations has had on the work of special procedures, we suggest that the working modalities and current configuration be adjusted to further safeguard the special procedures and the Human Rights Council with a view to further protecting their independence and ability to operate. We therefore suggest that the United Nations consider creating a stand-alone secretariat for the Human Rights Council, including for the support independent experts and special procedures, who would be functionally housed in the United Nations General Assembly and could report directly to the President of the General Assembly of the United Nations.

Furthermore, the United Nations Human Rights Council; the General Assembly and the United Nations overall must deal more robustly with threats, intimidation and attacks to the reputation, honor and independence of special procedures mandate holders. As such, any actors, whether they are States, civil society organizations or others must be held accountable for such actions, including by restricting their standing and participation in sessions of the Human Rights Council; as well as considering revocation of their registration with the Economic and Social Council.

**Increasing the geographical representation and retention rate of mandate holders**

While mandate holders are officially told that they perform their functions part-time, at a rate of three months per year, the wide repeated experience of mandate holders over the years points to the fact that it is comparable to a full-time job. Mandate holders have struggled to do justice to their mandates while trying to maintain their day jobs and sources of income. We would recommend that the United Nations consider shifting the nature of engagement of mandate holders from pro-bono work and instead receive remuneration for their work. This would compensate them for time spent on the mandate as well as introduce some balance into the system, making it more accessible for qualified candidates living in developing countries. In addition, security support and digital secure equipment for work need to be allocated to all mandate holders. Similarly, there would be less incentive to seek compensation from 3rd party donors which could influence the priorities and workstreams of mandate holders.

**Firewalling funding for special procedures and greater transparency around budgetary allocations**

The annual budget to support sixty Special Procedures mandates (46 thematic and 14 country mandates), stands at US$8 Million, less than 1% of the UN budget. Given the escalating global threats to human rights, reliance on such limited regular budget resources is inadequate. These shortcomings in financial support have resulted in a heavy reliance on extra-budgetary funding through voluntary contributions from a variety of sources, including Member States, foundations, and the corporate sector.

As recommended by the Independent Expert on debt, other international financial obligations and human rights in a 2024 letter to the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, an independent fund for the Human Rights Council's operations, including the special procedures, should be created by the fifth committee of the General Assembly. The creation of this fund would also ensure that special procedures that have been created by the Human Rights Council would be able to enjoy equal support and funds, irrespective of who the pen holder is and independent of the topic of the mandate. It would also reduce the attempts to unduly influence the work and priorities of special procedures.

Related to the above, we recommend that annual reports of all budget allocations made towards each Special Procedures mandate be generated on an annual basis and shared with to all mandate holders and member states.

**Documenting the methods of work of the special procedures**

Even though several special procedures have existed for at least three decades, many important aspects of the methods of work have not been documented in great detail (e.g. procedures for country visits, procedures for finalizing thematic reports, etc.). This has led to a persistent feeling that the special procedures "reinvents the wheel" when confronted with a challenge. It also makes it more difficult for mandate holders to know what the boundaries of their rights and duties are.

**Enhancing the role and engagement of the bureau of the Human Rights Council**

The role of the bureau of the Human Rights Council in engaging directly with mandate holders, the selection of mandate holders; their onboarding and their systematic debriefing must be strengthened. The bureau should also establish the function of an independent Ombudsman for the special procedures reporting directly to the office of the United Nations Office of Internal Oversight (OIOS), to be attached to it, and whose function would be to advise mandate holders on different issues of concern to them.

**Bringing allegations of misconduct or abuse by mandate holders or against them under the fold of the United Nations oversight mechanisms**

Any person engaged by the United Nations, whether in the form of a staff, or consultant must respect the United Nations Charter, and must sign a code of conduct that they must abide by. A positive consequence of such an arrangement is that all those actors are covered by the United Nations oversight mechanisms, including the OIOS, which assists the United Nations Secretary-General in fulfilling his oversight responsibilities through the provision of internal audit, investigation, inspection and evaluation services.

Staff of the United Nations are by definition subject to the UN Staff Regulations and Rules and the organization's internal administrative systems, including those governing misconduct, harassment, and other workplace issues. They can therefore be potentially investigated and held accountable.

Unfortunately, mandate holders appointed by the special procedures appear to be the only exception to this rule. Special Rapporteurs and Independent experts who want to file a case of bullying or harassment by other experts or by any United Nations staff member, consultant or other actors/entities engaged by the United Nations, have nowhere or no one to turn to; and cannot benefit from the complaint mechanisms that are otherwise available to UN staff members. While the Coordination Committee (CC) of the Special Procedures can provide some advice and support, it does so in an informal capacity. It does not have the capacity nor standing to mediate, investigate or assess such acts of abuse. Furthermore, as has been the case, there are instances where issues of conflict of interest have arisen, preventing the CC from engaging on an issue in an impartial manner. Therefore, we recommend that while Special Procedures must remain independent, mandate holders should come under the scope of the OIOS, allowing it to investigate reports of misconduct and abuse of authority either by themselves or against them.

**Increasing the engagement of the special procedures with key parts of the United Nations**

Opportunities for engaging special procedures by key bodies of the United Nations such as the General Assembly and the United Nations Security Council on global challenges of our time that many special procedures work on, such as climate change, the Women Peace and Security Agenda, and the international debt system – amongst others. Individual United Nations agencies must also fully engage with special procedures, particularly where they work on issues that intersect with the mandate of specific mandate holders or experts. They must provide all support possible and must respect the independence of mandate holders; their views and positions.

Related to the above, it is imperative that the United Nations and its respective agencies adhere to the international human rights principles and standards as enshrined in

international treaties and customary law. We are concerned that several UN agencies and senior UN officials have over the years undermined such principles, either intentionally or unintentionally by presenting certain concepts, or using terminology that is not agreed on internationally and that are not binding. This is for example the case when it comes to the rights of women and girls, where United Nations agencies have contributed to the erosion of international human rights law standards.

The United Nations and its agencies also promote concepts that are controversial, lack definition as binding human rights entitlements. Where a United Nations Agency or representative believes that a certain concept or principle is becoming soft law or acquiring a binding status, they must explain their position and cannot solely rely on their titles or positions.

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**** The Special Rapporteur on violence against women and girls and the Independent Expert on foreign debt, other international financial obligations and human right are independent human rights experts appointed by the United Nations Human Rights Council. They form part of the Special Procedures of the Human Rights Council. Special Procedures experts work on a voluntary basis; they are not UN staff and do not receive a salary for their work and serve in their individual capacity independent from any government or organization, including the UN and OHCHR.***