UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Volker Türk

Global Update to the Human Rights Council

Geneva, 15 June 2026

Mr. President, Excellencies, distinguished delegates,

The struggle for human rights is a story of enormous progress followed by regression.

Of advances and losses.

Of steps forwards, backwards, and sideways.

But the trajectory is clear: ultimately, it's towards larger freedom.

This Global Update is a snapshot of a complex mosaic that defies binary ideas of good or bad, allies or enemies.

Clearly, we face very serious human rights challenges. An unprecedented, shameless onslaught against international law is causing appalling human suffering. We must call it out, every time and everywhere, and work to contain and end it.

At the same time, the nuts and bolts of human rights work are delivering safety, dignity and freedom for millions of people every day.

Away from the headlines, human rights are improving lives, healing divisions, and creating opportunities. The Universal Declaration and the core treaties are ever more important. Little wonder that when they are asked, huge majorities of people say they want more human rights – not less.

I never forget the words of Nobel laureate Toni Morrison: "The very serious function of racism is distraction."

Let's not get distracted.

Let's forge on with our work to promote and protect human rights – and do everything possible to strengthen their legal foundations.

Just one global agreement – the Convention Against Landmines – helped reduce casualties from these heinous weapons by over 75 percent between 1999 and the early 2020s.

Many perpetrators of atrocity crimes would never have been prosecuted without human rights work.

Human rights need to be front and centre of today's pressing issues – from the climate crisis to guidelines around Artificial Intelligence, from the Ebola outbreak to the men's World Cup.

I encourage G7 leaders meeting across the lake to put human rights at the core of their discussions, as a force for stability and progress.

Mr. President,

I welcome the announcement that the United States and Iran have agreed on a peace deal that provides for an immediate and permanent ceasefire, the reopening of the Strait of Hormuz, and a framework for further negotiations. The conflict has had a devastating impact on human rights across the region and around the world.

The last months have shown that the deep differences in the region cannot be resolved by military means.

I deplore the use of force against Iran by Israel and the United States, which reportedly killed thousands of civilians, including hundreds of children, and destroyed hospitals, schools, homes, and other infrastructure. I again call for the findings of the US investigation into the horrific attack on Minab school to be made public.

Iran's attacks on civilian infrastructure in Gulf countries and Jordan, and its blockade of the Strait of Hormuz, are completely unacceptable. The blockade has had dire consequences for the global economy, for the delivery of humanitarian aid, and for the most vulnerable, including some 20,000 seafarers. The Deputy High Commissioner will brief you on this later today.

I feel deeply for people in Iran, caught between war and cruel repression. Since killing thousands of people during the egregious crushing of protests in January this year, the authorities have intensified their brutal crackdown, arresting thousands and imposing even more severe restrictions on civic space. They have executed at least 40 people on national security grounds so far this year, including 18 protestors.

Mr. President,

At this fragile moment, it is clear all sides need to exercise maximum restraint and work to implement the agreement reached, quickly and in good faith.

Mr. President,

In Gaza, Israeli forces have killed almost 1,000 Palestinians since the ceasefire was announced last October, the vast majority civilians. The Israeli authorities are pushing Palestinians into an ever-shrinking portion of the territory and imposing restrictions on lifesaving aid.

On the West Bank, Israeli security forces and settlers are accelerating the destruction of communities and the annexation of territory. So far this year, they have killed 57 people, injured nearly 1,300, detained hundreds, and issued 23 land confiscation orders.

Meanwhile, since the ceasefire, we have recorded at least 82 reported killings of Palestinians by Hamas.

Some senior Israeli officials have spoken publicly of the removal of all Palestinians from Gaza, and of ending any possibility of a viable Palestinian state. All of this is totally illegal.

We are out of red flags. Our many previous warnings have not been heeded.

All those with influence must exert pressure to make the ceasefire a reality, to end the unbearable suffering of Palestinians, and to hold those responsible to account.

Mr. President,

The renewed escalation between Hezbollah and Israel since 2 March has dragged the Lebanese people once again into a war that is not of their making. I hope yesterday's announcement will also bring them much-needed relief.

I am alarmed by widespread Israeli strikes on populated areas and essential infrastructure. Some 3,600 people are reported killed, including hundreds of women and children, and more than 11,000 injured. Together with large-scale displacement orders, these attacks have forced more than one million people from their homes.

At the same time, Hezbollah is launching sophisticated, far-reaching attacks into Israel, causing civilian deaths and injuries.

Twenty-six civilians have reportedly been killed across Israel since late February, in the hostilities between Israel and Hezbollah, and Israel and Iran.

I call for an immediate end to hostilities, the withdrawal of Israel from Lebanese territory, and investigations into violations by all parties of international humanitarian and human rights law.

We are deploying our own independent and impartial assessment mission to Lebanon, in agreement with the Government.

Mr. President,

In Sudan, the horrific conflict has expanded and escalated, marked by a sharp increase in the use of drone warfare. Between January and May 2026, our Office documented more than 1,000 civilians killed by drone strikes. Rape and sexual violence are rampant.

In Ukraine, it is deeply concerning that the horrendous war has escalated sharply in recent months. My team verified that more than 7,000 civilians were killed or injured in

the first five months of 2026 – more than during the same period in any of the previous three years.

The human rights and security situation in the eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo remains highly volatile. Clashes between the Congolese armed forces and armed groups in North and South Kivu are complicating the response to the deadly Ebola virus.

We will provide more details to the Council on these three situations.

Mr. President,

I am appalled by the reckless, wanton approach to human life that characterizes some of today's global decision-making.

We are seeing a global shift in how war is waged. In Sudan, long-range drones have destroyed aid convoys and, as I saw myself, vital energy infrastructure. In Ukraine, relentless drone attacks have caused mass casualties and terrorized civilians. In the DRC, Gaza, Israel, Lebanon, and Myanmar, drone warfare is creating a new circle of hell.

The UN has warned for many years against the development of lethal autonomous weapons. This reality is now upon us.

States urgently need to consider the moral and legal questions this raises; agree on a common approach that protects civilian lives; and recommit to diplomacy and mediation. They must update legal frameworks to require human control and ensure accountability.

Autonomous weapons cannot become a license for atrocity crimes.

The prospect of billion-dollar, AI-enabled weapons, brought down by billion-dollar, AI-enabled defensive shields, exposes the horror, emptiness, and futility of war.

Security experts warn that unrestrained military operations that flatten entire areas are fueling grievances and contributing to a new generation of extremists. They can never lead to lasting security.

We need a much stronger focus on the financial drivers of this nihilism. Who benefits?

We need to replace war economies with human rights economies.

Mr. President,

Partout dans le monde, les populations réclament des mesures fondées sur les droits humains, pour apaiser les tensions et prévenir les conflits.

Le Sahel central se trouve à un dangereux point de basculement.

Au Mali, des groupes armés extrémistes ont lancé des attaques coordonnées contre plusieurs villes et localités en avril, faisant de nombreuses victimes parmi la population civile. Je suis préoccupé par les informations selon lesquelles les forces de sécurité auraient procédé à des exécutions extrajudiciaires, enlevé des opposants politiques et détenu des journalistes de renom pour avoir fait leur travail.

Au Burkina Faso, des groupes armés extrémistes continuent d'attaquer, d'enlever et de menacer des civils. Je déplore que les autorités aient dissous ou suspendu plus de 930 organisations de la société civile depuis d'avril.

Les attaques par des groupes armés extrémistes au Niger se multiplient, et la formation de groupes dits d'autodéfense pèse de graves risques d'exactions et de violences intercommunautaires. Personne n'a été tenu responsable des violations qui auraient été commises par l'armée.

Au Cameroun, la situation sécuritaire dans les régions du nord-ouest et du sud-ouest reste très préoccupante, les forces de sécurité et les groupes armés séparatistes étant impliqués dans des exécutions illégales et des enlèvements. Au moins vingt personnes auraient été tuées rien qu'en avril de cette année.

In Nigeria, I urge the authorities to conduct a prompt and independent investigation into airstrikes by the military that reportedly killed more than 100 civilians in the North in May. I am also deeply concerned by repeated abductions of schoolchildren and teachers.

In Ethiopia, the armed conflict in Amhara and Oromia continues unabated, as the warring parties kill, abduct, rape, arrest and detain civilians. I continue to be worried about the situation in Tigray. Reports of violence involving Orthodox Christians and Muslims in Oromia reflect a concerning escalation of inter-communal tensions.

Somalia faces heightened insecurity and humanitarian needs. Proposed electoral reforms have triggered an uptick in tensions and violence. My new Office, agreed recently, will work to support the Somali people.

In Haiti, gang violence has resulted in at least 2,300 deaths, 1,100 injuries, and 99 kidnappings since the start of the year. I urge the authorities to move quickly on the judicial units to tackle impunity. The Gang Suppression Force is urgently needed and needs to operate in line with international human rights law.

Hay una emergencia de derechos humanos en Cuba, que está ahogándose por las sanciones de Estados Unidos. La alarma está encendida: necesitamos una distensión urgente.

En Perú, el próximo Gobierno tendrá que dar prioridad al restablecimiento del Estado de derecho, a la independencia de las instituciones judiciales y a un diálogo nacional para sanar una sociedad profundamente dividida.

In Syria, thousands of victims and survivors demand justice and accountability. The prosecution of the former president and other officials – while at this point mostly in absentia – is an important step. These proceedings need to respect international standards; and more must follow. My Office is working to support transitional justice and promote reconciliation. The Syrian people need to be able to build their own future without outside interference.

In Yemen, I call again for the immediate and unconditional release by the de facto Houthi authorities of personnel from the United Nations, civil society organizations, and diplomatic missions, including eight of my own staff. These detentions are utterly unacceptable.

Mr. President,

Cuts to aid around the world are having a catastrophic impact on human rights.

Total humanitarian needs for this year are equivalent to just three days of global military spending. The funding needed by my Office across this entire year is less than what the world spends on weapons and soldiers in two hours.

Unless we change course, poverty and hunger will spike, tensions will escalate, and more people will be forced from their homes along unsafe migration routes.

This affects everyone. No country is immune.

Instability, inequalities, and weak governance are fertile ground for extremism and conflict. They also fuel transnational crime, including the trade in illicit drugs, worth hundreds of billions of dollars a year.

Criminal groups are exploiting global crises, conflict, and migration to expand their activities, from Afghanistan to Guinea-Bissau to the Sahel and the Americas.

Violence associated with drug trafficking has risen sharply in many countries along trafficking routes.

Meanwhile, the so-called war on drugs has become a vicious circle. Militarized responses, particularly in the Americas, feed further violence.

The United States of America has reportedly killed more than 200 people, in airstrikes against civilian ships in the Caribbean and Eastern Pacific. Calling these attacks part of a war on narco-terrorism does not justify them.

Illicit drugs are also having a massive negative impact on our climate and environment, from water stress to deforestation and the dumping of toxic waste.

Governments need to tackle corruption, strengthen institutions, and invest in harm reduction, education, healthcare and jobs.

Mr. President,

In my last Global Update, I spoke of the authoritarian playbook. It's growing thicker by the day.

Our preliminary data indicates that some 950 human rights defenders, journalists, and trade unionists were killed or forcibly disappeared worldwide in 2025 – more than double the number a decade ago.

In Uganda, for example, the new Protection of Sovereignty Act strengthens state control over civil society organizations.

In Belarus, Iran and Russia, thousands of human rights activists and journalists are criminalized and prosecuted as terrorists and extremists.

In Serbia, the demands of anti-corruption protests remain unanswered for many months, while the human rights situation is deteriorating.

In India, following welcome court decisions to grant bail to human rights defenders who have been in lengthy pre-trial detention, I urge their immediate release.

Attacks against environmental human rights defenders are rising. Our latest figures show they are detained in at least 55 countries.

Media censorship is growing, while freedom of expression declining in 44 countries, according to several surveys.

Globally, my Office has recorded more than 800 journalists and media workers behind bars, including citizen journalists and human rights bloggers. Most recently, journalists have been prosecuted under vague charges in Tunisia and Türkiye.

And in Gabon, Iran, the Republic of the Congo, and Russia, authorities curtailed access to information through internet shutdowns. Zambia forced the cancellation of RightsCon, the world's largest digital tech and human rights conference.

Around the world, particularly in Southeast and East Asia, and parts of Africa, Central Asia, Europe and Central America, transnational repression is increasingly used as a tool of persecution across borders, to pursue government critics and human rights defenders. A number of governments are even misusing Interpol processes for this purpose. We need to put a much stronger focus on this.

Mr. President,

History shows that authoritarians have often succeeded in confining millions of people within a parallel reality of conspiracies and lies.

Today's extreme concentration of political, economic, and technological power is facilitating this.

When we consider the staggering sums spent by tech tycoons on lobbying, it is clear that today's innovation often serves private interests rather than the public good.

Meanwhile, we are offered new products – such as AI glasses – that establish ever more sophisticated shields between people and reality. I wish someone would invent glasses that help us see the humanity in each other instead.

Some tech companies and countries, particularly in the European Union, are considering age-related restrictions on social media, as part of their efforts to protect children online.

My Office's new guidelines on AI and children's rights can help to ensure that these measures are grounded in human rights.

The organized backlash against gender equality forms one of the thickest chapters of the authoritarian playbook.

Violence against women is treated as a sad but acceptable fact, against a backdrop of misogynistic rhetoric and aggressive online content.

The so-called manosphere monetizes harmful stereotypes that undermine the rights of both young men and women. Recent surveys show that GenZ men in many countries are more opposed to women's independence than their grandfathers.

Afghanistan's new law, implying the legitimization of child marriage, aggravates the agony of Afghan women and girls. It is despicable and must be abolished, together with all other seriously discriminatory measures.

Russia is intensifying its persecution of LGBTIQ+ communities. In the past three months alone, at least nine organizations protecting their rights have been designated extremist.

I deplore the Ghanaian parliament's decision to pass a bill with harsher criminal sanctions against LGBTQ+ people and human rights defenders. I urge the President not to sign this law.

I also deplore the adoption of legal provisions in Niger that criminalize consensual same-sex relationships, with severe sanctions.

Six years after the death of George Floyd, the knee is still on the necks of many Black people around the world.

White nationalist groups complain about supposed double standards and two-tier policing. But the facts show that across regions, police are several times more likely to use force against people of African descent.

The dehumanization of migrants and refugees, including in the UK, US, and many EU countries, is appalling, often leading to also the denial of their rights.

The European Union's new rules on returning migrants risk expanding the use of detention, establishing offshore return hubs, and weakening safeguards against refoulement. I am also worried about growing pressure from some States on the European Court of Human Rights, around migration and refugee law.

I am particularly concerned about the continuing trend of involuntary returns of Afghan asylum-seekers and refugees, from countries including Iran and Pakistan, to Afghanistan, in breach of international refugee law.

In South Africa, poverty and inequalities are driving social tensions, including xenophobia and violence against migrants and refugees. I trust the Government will make good on its pledge to put human rights at the heart of its response.

Mega sports events are supposed to bring people together in unity and peace. It is troubling to see how immigration enforcement is impacting the men's World Cup. My plea to the US authorities is that they provide safety and dignity to all players, officials, and supporters.

I urge all Governments to address refugee and migration issues humanely and in full compliance with the tried and tested rules of human rights and refugee law.

Mr. President,

Islamophobia, antisemitism, as well as attacks and discrimination against Indigenous Peoples and ethnic and religious minorities are widespread and, in many cases, rising. We need an all-out effort to curb this phenomenon.

I am very concerned about China's counterterrorism and assimilation policies, particularly as they affect minorities in the Xinjiang, Inner Mongolia and Tibetan regions. The new law on ethnic unity risks deepening restrictions on freedoms of language, education, practice of religion, culture, expression and assembly; and penalizing the peaceful exercise of minority rights in general. I call for the law to be repealed and for these practices to end.

Nicaragua stands alone in not engaging with the human rights system at all. The recent death in custody of Indigenous leader Brooklyn Rivera is the latest proof of its repressive policies and broader pattern of violations against Indigenous and Afro-descendant communities.

Mr. President,

The social and economic costs of the crises I've mentioned ripple across generations and the wider world.

Young voters in many countries feel alienated and ignored. They demand their human rights – as a ladder to a better life.

Last month in the Republic of Korea, I saw how Gwangju and other Human Rights Cities are improving people's lives with equitable policies on transport, healthcare, education and more.

During my recent visit to Mongolia, I was encouraged that the authorities are using the recommendations of human rights bodies to advance reform.

Comprehensive anti-discrimination laws strengthen social cohesion and build trust within communities. My Office is supporting countries with such legislation.

I welcome recent legal successes. In Australia, an Indigenous group secured record compensation for mining without their consent. In China, the Supreme Court recognized that discrimination and bullying against lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people violate their human rights.

I trust that the appointment of the new Attorney General in Guatemala will strengthen democracy in practice.

Across all regions, from Benin to Montenegro, from the Philippines to Slovakia and Spain, National Human Rights Institutions are supporting victims of violations, safeguarding civic space and combating online hate speech.

Regional mechanisms also play an important role.

Regional courts in Latin America, Africa and Europe are holding States to account for environmental harms - from Nigeria and Peru to Switzerland and beyond.

The African Union compliance framework for peace operations has helped build a culture of accountability. Despite significant challenges, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, ASEAN, can play a crucial mediating role to resolve the conflict in Myanmar.

The Inter-American Commission on Human Rights has proven to be a successful path towards justice for victims, from arbitrary detention to privacy rights and more.

The international human rights system has also proven its value.

The work of my own staff sheds light in the darkest corners. It has been cited in high-profile legal cases, including by the International Court of Justice, and has influenced hundreds of legal reforms.

Investigations mandated by this Council have helped bring perpetrators of international crimes to justice – a significant achievement as the Council marks its 20th anniversary.

For example, the Commission of Inquiry on Syria has cooperated directly with over 63 criminal investigations into war crimes and crimes against humanity committed since 2011.

Human rights shape judicial thinking at national and regional levels. The Swiss Supreme Court has referred to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights in more than 300 of its decisions.

Treaty Bodies have advanced legal and policy reform through their recommendations, including on abolishing the death penalty and on women's sexual and reproductive rights.

I condemn disinformation campaigns and attempts to undermine the credibility of the UN human rights system, including Special Procedures mandate holders. Criticism and debate are legitimate and necessary; efforts to intimidate, discredit, or even sanction, are not. They are unacceptable.

Mr. President,

Human rights work is always unfinished business.

We can never take anything for granted. Those on the frontlines know that.

I think of the human rights defenders I met recently in Sudan, in Mongolia, in Mexico and in many other countries: all struggling in different ways; all showing courage and tenacity every day.

We know how much human rights can unite us.

Which is why we launched the Global Alliance for Human Rights last week.

Over the next two years, this Alliance will become a hive of activity, with different groups and communities around the world making new connections and building new partnerships.

Human rights are the glue that binds us together. When we join forces to strengthen those bonds, we build a better world for all.

Thank you.