Distinguished President of the Human Rights Council, President of the General Assembly, High Commissioner, Excellencies, Distinguished Delegates, Colleagues, Friends,

It is a profound honour to address the Human Rights Council.

For 10 years, you may have known me as the “other” High Commissioner, just down the road.

And so it is a great privilege to be with you for the first time in my capacity as Secretary-General.

I am here in a spirit of gratitude. And I am here at a time of urgency.

Disregard for human rights is a disease, and it is a disease that is spreading – north, south, east and west.

The Human Rights Council must be part of the cure.

You can be pivotal for prevention – sounding early warnings of crises.

Commissions of Inquiry and fact-finding missions respond to serious allegations of human rights violations around the world.

The scrutiny and recommendations of the Council’s independent experts shed light, enhance protection and guide policy.

The Council's growing engagement with civil society strengthens so much of your work – and is especially vital at a time when civil society space is shrinking in so many places.

And through the Universal Periodic Review, every country in the world has had its human rights record thoroughly examined.

Despite differences among members, this Council is based on a shared understanding: upholding the rights of all people and in the interest of all States.

And that truth is integral to every aspect of the work of the United Nations. Our three pillars of peace, development and human rights are inseparable and they are mutually reinforcing.
Human rights – civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights -- must never be seen as a luxury or “saved for later”, after peace and development have been achieved.

Human rights are an intrinsic part of all that we do – and all that we are.

And so we must speak up for human rights in an impartial way without double standards.

We must invest in human rights and recognize human rights as values and goals unto themselves – not allowing them to be instrumentalized as a political tool.

And indeed, the integrity and credibility of this Council will only be enhanced by proceeding in a manner that avoids unbalanced treatment of Member States.

Mr. President,

I say all of these things as the Secretary-General of the United Nations. But my support for human rights goes deeper.

It’s personal.

I grew up under the Salazar dictatorship in Portugal. I did not know democracy until I was twenty-four years old.

I came of age seeing how the denial of not just civil and political rights – but also social, cultural and economic rights – corroded every aspect of society.

It condemned many to a life of poverty.

It triggered mass migration. Portuguese couldn’t vote through the ballot box, so many voted with their feet.

And I saw the dictatorship oppressing not only its own citizens, but also the people of the African colonies, including by waging wars for 13 long and bloody years.

And my passion for defending human rights has sprung both from the grassroots as a young man – and later from the top as Prime Minister leading a country in pursuit of human rights and dignity for all its citizens.

And it only grew stronger serving as High Commissioner for Refugees and witnessing the terrible consequences of ignoring – or blatantly trampling on – people’s fundamental rights and dignity.

Now, as Secretary-General, I see every day how the future of our world and the future of human rights go hand-in-hand.

Mr. President,

Our world is becoming more dangerous, less predictable, more chaotic.
New conflicts are multiplying. Old ones never die. And both are more and more interconnected with the threat of global terrorism and violent extremism.

Again and again, we see violations of human rights as early and leading indicators of crisis.

Again and again, we have seen human rights abuses play into the hands of extremists.

At the same time, violations of economic rights -- such as massive inequalities within and between States -- are a growing source of social unrest.

If we are to truly address these challenges, we must make prevention our priority, tackle root causes of conflict, and react earlier and more effectively in addressing human rights concerns.

That is the lesson of so many conflicts and the driving force behind the Human Rights up Front initiative.

We know that just as denial of human rights is part of the problem – the active promotion of human rights is part of the solution.

And that means supporting Member States in building capacity -- strengthening states, institutions and civil society.

Perhaps the best prevention tool we have is the Universal Declaration of Human Rights – and the treaties that derive from it.

The rights set out in it identify many of the root causes of conflict, but equally they provide real world solutions through real change on the ground.

I look to the Human Rights Council to be fully engaged and help affect the change on the range of issues that require your attention in our troubled and turbulent world.

They include deliberate and systematic violations of international humanitarian law in a growing number of conflicts – and which this Council has done much to expose.

We are increasingly seeing the perverse phenomenon of populism and extremism feeding off each other in a frenzy of growing racism, xenophobia, anti-Semitism, anti-Muslim hatred and other forms of intolerance.

Minorities, indigenous communities and others face discriminations and abuse across the world. And the same applies to members of the LGBTI community.

The rights of refugees and migrants are under attack. Human trafficking is on the rise.

And with so many people escaping war, the international community must not escape its responsibilities.

We must do our utmost to re-establish the integrity of the international refugee protection regime.
Our challenge here is not really about “sharing the burden” – it is about “sharing the responsibility”. We have a collective responsibility embedded in the values we share and the Charter that defines us.

By the same measure, we must forcefully resist calls to reinstate torture. Torture is cowardly, produces no usable information and shames every country that inflicts it.

And similarly, let us work together to turn back efforts to reinstate capital punishment. I say this as a citizen of a country that abolished the death penalty 150 years ago.

Mr. President,

We simply cannot achieve any of our goals without the full participation of women and girls. Within the UN, I am committed to establish a clear road map with benchmarks to achieve gender parity across the system. I will soon propose to the General Assembly ambitious new steps to help end sexual exploitation and abuse committed under the UN flag.

We must do far more around the world. Hard fought gains on women's rights are being chipped away – whether it is through a pushback on women’s reproductive rights or turning a blind eye to domestic violence or violently enforcing traditional gender roles.

Let us say loud and clear: women’s rights are human rights.

As we do so, I also make a special appeal for the rights of children. Millions of children around the world are denied their rights.

And children are the main victims of war and crises – the effects of which often last a lifetime. More than half of the world’s refugees are children – perhaps the most defenceless people on earth.

Let us act to protect children of all ages, ensure they know their rights, and can live and breathe those rights every day and everywhere.

Mr. President,

Let us also recognize that we must do more to ensure equal attention to economic, social and cultural rights.

The corpus of human rights is indivisible and interdependent.

We cannot pick and choose, emphasizing some and ignoring others.

The 2030 Agenda provides an ideal platform to demonstrate our commitment to all human rights.

As the High Commissioner has often pointed out, the right to development is at the core of the 2030 Agenda.
The right to quality education, housing, food, water, equal access to employment – these and other economic and social rights can and must be realized.

As we work to promote all human rights, I want to express a final word of appreciation and admiration to those on the frontlines.

To human rights defenders, I say: thank you for your courage. The United Nations is on your side. And I am on your side.

I remind Member States of their responsibility to ensure that human rights defenders can operate without fear of intimidation.

Human rights defenders must be able to freely participate in the Council and engage more broadly with the UN without fear of reprisal. This is critical to our work and to the credibility of Member States.

Journalists are an essential part of the checks and balances of any society. They, too, must be guaranteed full protection in law and practice to do their vital work independently and without interference.

Mr. President,
Excellencies,

The struggle for human rights is at the heart a struggle to expand the horizons of the possible, to bring out the best of our selves and to unleash the best of our societies.

Human rights inspire. Human rights transform. Human rights drive progress and change the course of history.

I am determined to raise the profile of human rights and to speak out whenever necessary.

And I will do my utmost to defend the defenders.

We will build a safer and more stable world for our children as we recognise the interconnections between peace, development and human rights.

We will advance security by advancing dignity, justice, equality and the rule of law.

I thank the Human Rights Council for working to point the way. Thank you very much.