

International Roundtable on Human Rights:

Democratic Accountability, State Sovereignty, and International Governance

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Roundtable opening address by

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Distinguished speakers, ladies and gentlemen,

Human rights have been a cornerstone of Icelandic foreign policy for a long time and we will continue to advocate strongly for their promotion and protection. Human rights are also mainstreamed through our development co-operation and a major theme in all our bilateral relations.

Human rights are at the epicenter of most of the current crises in the world. Conflicts and instability that have displaced more people than ever since World War II and human rights violations are both the cause and effect of the situation we are faced with today. They are also at the core of the political debate in many democratic societies where extremist voices threaten to undermine the respect for human rights - a very troubling trend that we have to fight by all means at every opportunity.

How we manage to do that will bear witness to how strongly we are committed in reality to our hard won rights when challenged. These rights did not come about easily. Their development and codification is one of the greatest accomplishments of our common efforts through multilateral cooperation, especially the United Nations, since World War II.

Equality and the respect for human rights are increasingly seen as a key ingredient to sustainable peace. Most of the wars in the first decade of this century were examples where post-conflict situation relapsed. Studies show that states where women were a part of the peace-building efforts and where their human rights were respected were less likely to relapse. Respect for human rights of all without any discrimination is key, while social and economic deprivation, coupled with historical exclusion, can animate grievances.

The agreement reached in the Agenda 2030 and the Global Goals was a positive step forward. Based on the understanding that no one should be left behind, it addresses key challenges that underpin the human rights system. Gender equality and the empowerment of women are prominent and so are children's rights to education and health; environmental issues that threaten human rights to water and food are addressed and the importance of strong institutions and good governance are highlighted. The new agenda gives us hope, but now action and implementation are required by States and all other stakeholders.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

As a leader in gender equality, we have put a particular focus on advancing gender equality and the empowerment of women. Thus, we advocate for the implementation of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, which carries legal obligations and to which most States are parties. We also focus on the implementation of other international commitments, such as the Beijing Platform for Action and UN Security Council Resolution 1325.

In addition we have been keen on expanding the pool of active stakeholders in advancing gender equality by engaging men and boys. For these purposes, under the leadership of my predecessor and in good cooperation with Suriname, Iceland developed the so-called Barbershop concept, creating a platform for men to discuss their part in advancing gender equality.

It is my firm belief that actively engaging men and boys in this effort is crucial for advancing women's rights. Barbershop events have already taken place at the UN Headquarters in New York and in Geneva as well as at NATO Headquarters in Brussels with high-level participation. Further events are in the planning for the OSCE and the Council of Baltic Sea States. It is my hope that this initiative will help advance the discussion and the necessary mindset to achieve equal rights for women and men.

Of course, champions of human rights abroad must deliver on its own international human rights obligations. We are currently preparing our Universal Periodic Review to be examined before the Human Rights Council in November. It is an opportunity to look inwards, encourage dialogue with civil society on human rights in Iceland, and benefit from an external examination. We believe that the UPR system has been a great step forward in putting all UN Member States at the same footing by having to go through scrutiny by their peers on a regular basis.

The UPR works as an accountability mechanism to a certain extent and it is extremely important for all UN Member States to participate in the UPR system in good faith, as well as to work with the special procedures set up by the Human Rights Council. The same applies also the Human Rights treaty bodies where State Parties have committed themselves to be examined at regular intervals about how they implement their treaty obligations.

Despite political complexities, the international human rights system has the potential to assist states in upholding their obligations, increasing respect for human rights and, while doing so, creating a more stable world. No state can today claim that human rights are internal affairs. That is simply not acceptable. Human rights are universal.

I thank you for the opportunity to open this roundtable and I wish you a fruitful discussion.