

27 February 2017

71st session of the General Assembly

**Address by H.E. Peter Thomson,
Opening of the 34th Session of the Human Rights Council**

Your Excellency Joaquín Martelli, President of the Human Rights Council,
Your Excellency António Guterres, Secretary-General of the United Nations,
Your Excellency Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein, United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights,
Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a great pleasure to address you this morning for the opening of the 34th Session of the Human Rights Council.

I would like to express profound thanks to the Human Rights Council for the work it does. In the same breath, I express deep appreciation for the efforts of human rights defenders from across Governments, the United Nations system, the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, civil society, academia, and national human rights institutions, all who serve to uphold the best interests of this Council and the promise of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

The global effort to promote and protect human rights, an effort anchored in mutual respect and concern for the welfare of others, must never be allowed to diminish.

This is doubly so in troubled times across our world, as the international community grapples with how best to sustain peace, drive sustainable development and protect human rights for the benefit of all.

Excellencies, Distinguished Delegates,

There is a growing appreciation at the international level that insufficient attention has been given to prevention. In the new approach to sustaining peace, conflict prevention has a central place, and in the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals, prevention of unacceptable human and environmental conditions is at the core of our work.

Last month at the United Nations in New York, we spent a day in a High-Level Dialogue, examining the inter-linkages between sustaining peace and sustainable development. Joining me on the podium were the President of the Security Council, the President of ECOSOC, the Chair of the Peace Building Commission, and the Secretary-General. By the end of our deliberations, it was clear that sustaining peace and sustainable development were two sides of the same coin. Simply put, one could not be achieved without the other.

Here in Geneva, we must focus on how human rights is also integral to a world of sustained peace.

We know from experience, for example, that abuse of human rights is at the center of most all armed conflicts that affect us. Thus, the same focus on prevention has strong resonance for the field of human rights.

With millions of people caught up in intractable armed conflict, how do we prevent mass atrocity crimes?

How do we prevent the impasse between nations that has far too often paralyzed or delayed efforts to protect civilians, prevent gross violations and abuse, uphold international humanitarian and human rights law, and end impunity?

And of course, in these times of the greatest humanitarian and refugee crisis since World War Two, we must ask ourselves how we can better provide security for the millions of people fleeing conflict, violence, intolerance and persecution?

We must ask ourselves too, how we can better address the stigmatization of people and the protection of vulnerable and marginalized individuals and groups from rising tides of xenophobia and hate?

The answers to these questions lie in the creation of an enabling environment for sustaining peace, implementing sustainable development, and protecting human rights. And it goes without saying that in the creation of this enabling environment, the work of the human rights community and the Human Rights Council will be vital to our ultimate success.

Excellencies, Distinguished Delegates,

The Human Rights Council has served as humanity's defensive line, by establishing universal norms and standards, supporting their implementation, monitoring their achievement, and ensuring accountability for violations.

The 23 Commissions of Inquiry and Fact-Finding Missions established by the Council over the years, along with the thematic and country-specific expertise of the 80 special procedure mandate holders, have proven invaluable.

Within the Human Rights Council's system, you have raised the alarm on emerging mass atrocities and worked to prevent their perpetration.

You have worked as human rights pioneers and innovators, shaping how human rights protections should apply in new and emerging contexts in our ever-changing world.

You have served as guides and partners helping to support and monitor nationally led efforts to implement recommendations from the Universal Periodic Review and special procedures mandate holders.

And you have strived to ensure universality, objectivity, and a co-operative approach to this work, including through mechanisms such as the Voluntary Technical Assistance Trust Fund, supporting the participation of Least Developed Countries and Small Island Developing States to enable their participation in the work of the Council.

Excellencies, Distinguished Delegates,

With the United Nations increasingly focused on how to secure a safer and more prosperous future for humanity, greater collaboration, cooperation, and partnership will be required from all relevant parties.

All parts of the United Nations system must work together to drive action across the three pillars of peace, development, and human rights. We must ensure that the human rights expertise headquartered in Geneva is fully integrated into work of the United Nations system including the UN field offices. We must support efforts being made to forge closer collaboration between Geneva and New York. In this collaboration, we must mutually respect our competencies, and avoid any duplication of processes.

Excellencies, Distinguished Delegates,

Allow me to conclude by reminding you that the central theme of the 71st session of the General Assembly is to achieve momentum on all 17 Sustainable Development Goals. The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development envisages a world in which people live in peaceful and inclusive societies, extreme poverty has been eliminated, prosperity increased, women and girls empowered, the Ocean and terrestrial environment protected, and climate change effectively addressed.

The role of human rights is absolutely fundamental to the achievement of the future we want for this world. In fact, the 17 Sustainable Development Goals are infused in the essence of universal human rights. Thus, it is self-evident that human rights must join with sustaining peace as inseparable travelling companions on our journey to implement the Sustainable Development Goals in full by the year 2030, the target date we have set ourselves.

Without these two companions, the Sustainable Development Goals will be put in jeopardy, and without the fulfilment of the Sustainable Development Goals, our way of life on this planet will be put in jeopardy.

The stakes for humanity could not be higher; so, let us get on with the toils of the journey, helping each other along the way, taking strength from those two travelling companions, ever keeping our gaze on the higher ground ahead.

I wish all you the best for a productive Session and thank you again for your dedication to the promotion and protection of human rights in this world.

Merci beaucoup.