



Human Rights Priorities

A Human Rights Agenda for the next United Nations Secretary-General

The new Secretary-General of the United Nations will inherit a significant array of human rights challenges, and must urgently deal with the capability of United Nations institutions to protect and promote human rights globally. It is vitally important that she or he places human rights at the heart of the United Nations' agenda.

Amnesty International, CIVICUS, the Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect, Human Rights Watch, the International Federation for Human Rights and the World Federalist Movement-Institute for Global Policy here set out eight key human rights priorities that we would like the candidates for the new Secretary-General to publicly embrace during the selection process.

1. Strengthen the impact of the United Nations on human rights

Human rights is the third pillar of the United Nations, along with the maintenance of international peace and security, and development.

The new Secretary-General must ensure that human rights are given sufficient prominence and resources, commit to continuing and developing the Human Rights Up Front initiative, and support UN member states in realizing their human rights commitments at the national level, including in the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals and environmental sustainability. The new Secretary-General needs to take bold and transformative steps to shift the world onto a sustainable and resilient path, leaving no-one behind.

She or he should ensure that UN peacekeepers enforce their mandate to protect civilians more proactively and that UN missions in the field tenaciously document and publicly report on human rights violations. They should also ensure that senior UN representatives in countries around the world make human rights a priority and speak out to denounce serious violations even in the face of intense pressure from the host country. When undertaking country visits or meeting high-level government officials, she or he should consistently raise human rights concerns even at the risk of disagreeing with or confronting member states.

She or he must also take steps to ensure that the United Nations maintains the highest level of integrity and transparency in all of its activities, including through making high-quality appointments and ensuring staff accountability. Severe lapses in areas such as sexual exploitation and abuse have undermined the UN's credibility, making this a crucial area for the next Secretary-General. She or he must strictly uphold the UN's zero tolerance policy for sexual exploitation and abuse, including by implementing measures adopted by UN Security Council resolution 2272 (2016) to prevent and combat this scourge.

2 Champion the rights of marginalized people

Discrimination and failure to realize human rights continue in many forms around the world, driving marginalization and deepening poverty and social, economic and political inequality.

The new Secretary-General must consistently call on states to put in place laws, policies and practices to respect, protect and fulfil the rights of marginalized people and seek to end all forms of discrimination, including on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity. She or he should call on states to give full consideration to implementing the recommendations of human rights treaty monitoring bodies.

3 Seek to prevent and end mass atrocity crimes

Conflict is proliferating, and states and armed groups have deliberately attacked civilians and committed other grave abuses. The Secretary-General has powers under Article 99 of the Charter to “bring to the attention of the Security Council any matter which in his opinion may threaten the maintenance of international peace and security”.

The Secretary-General should exercise these powers, including by standing up to the permanent members of the Security Council when needed and by discouraging them from using their veto power to prevent action to end atrocities. She or he should report publicly on human rights situations as a means of providing early warning to prevent violence and protect civilians. She or he must also encourage and assist states to effectively prevent and end serious violations of international human rights and humanitarian law.

4 Combat impunity

As Chief Executive Officer of the United Nations, the Secretary-General should commit to fighting impunity for crimes under international law both at the international and national levels.

The Secretary-General should ensure that the International Criminal Court and internationalized tribunals are receiving the political and financial support needed to match the burden imposed on them. She or he should oppose efforts by countries that seek to apply international justice selectively or to shield heads of state or governments from the reach of international justice. She or he should also actively urge UN member states to hold perpetrators of grave human rights violations accountable, including by promoting the use of the International Criminal Court.

5 Defend civil society

State crackdowns on dissent and peaceful protest have expanded alarmingly in recent years, yet civil society action is an essential bulwark against the regression of respect for human rights.

The Secretary-General must display a clear commitment to civil society, in particular human rights defenders and journalists, by protecting the ability of civil society organizations to seek foreign funding and to participate in UN fora. She or he must fight for their rights and oppose reprisals.

6 Ensure gender equality

The importance of women's rights and gender equality inside and outside the United Nations cannot be overstated.

The Secretary-General must do everything within her or his power to advance women's rights and gender equality, helping to implement key commitments such as the Women, Peace and Security agenda and the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action. She or he should lead by example, by ensuring gender equality at all levels of the leadership of the organization, and by ensuring senior-level gender expertise is deployed throughout the UN system, including in the Department of Peacekeeping Operations, the Department of Political Affairs, in UN field missions, and in her or his own office.

7 Deliver a new deal for refugees and migrants

Armed conflict and human rights abuses have resulted in the highest numbers of refugees, migrants and internally displaced people since the end of the Second World War.

In support of the Refugee Convention, the Secretary-General must oppose any efforts to prevent people from fleeing to seek asylum and should work assiduously towards a new global approach to refugees. This approach should be based on a commitment to international co-operation in which developed countries accept equitably shared responsibility for resettlement to ease the disproportionate burden carried by countries of first refuge. She or he should lead on broadly reviewing the current structures for the governance of international migration and integrating human rights within them. She or he must consistently speak out against xenophobia.

8 End the death penalty

Significant progress has been made towards abolition of the death penalty globally.

The Secretary-General must do everything possible to achieve global abolition of the death penalty during her or his term of office.

The selection of the next Secretary-General is a key issue for the United Nations this year, and both process and outcome will have significant consequences for the organization and people around the world. The next Secretary-General must make human rights a top priority; doing so will have a major impact on peace, security and development globally.