



Speech by H.E. Ambassador Federico Villegas,

upon being elected as President of the UN Human Rights Council for the year 2022

6th December 2021

Thank you very much, Madam President, distinguished colleague and friend Ambassador Kahn,

Excellencies,

Colleagues,

Ladies and gentlemen,

I deeply appreciate having been elected, as Permanent Representative of Argentina, to preside over the Human Rights Council for 2022. And I especially appreciate the consensus in the Latin American and Caribbean region supporting me to assume such a high responsibility. GRULAC is a region of peace and shared values, which plays a constructive role in the international human rights system. Also, it has given the world such outstanding personalities as the High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet, with whom I will have the honor to work hand in hand next year from the Presidency.

A special thanks to you, Ambassador Kahn, for guiding us through 2021 and keeping the Human Rights Council functioning during an unprecedented pandemic. This was a collective effort that was efficiently initiated during the Presidency of the Permanent Representative of Austria. We were pioneers at the UN in implementing virtual and hybrid multilateral diplomacy, adopting more than 175 resolutions without cancelling or postponing sessions. Your excellent leadership -professional, warm and balanced- brought us to a successful conclusion. You have set the bar very high, and I will make every effort to learn from your experience.

Madam President,

As Permanent Representative of Argentina, it is a special responsibility for me to assume the Presidency of the Council for the first time, given the impact that the universal system for the promotion and protection of human rights has had and continues to have on my country, Argentina.

Madres y Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo came to Geneva in the late 1970s to denounce the enforced disappearance of their sons, daughters, grandsons and granddaughters. They promoted the creation in 1980 of the first special thematic procedure of the then Commission on Human Rights, the Working Group on Enforced Disappearances of

Persons. Those Mothers and Grandmothers returned 30 years later to Geneva, representing the maturity of a society that was able to make human rights a state policy, and they were present when we approved the draft of the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance, led by our country and France, and which the General Assembly adopted in 2006.

This evolution is a result of the incorporation of human rights as part of our democratic identity since the return to democracy, eradicating the breakdown of the rule of law and the impunity in crimes against humanity. Thus, we were able as a society to build a solid bridge between our tragic past and the expansion of human rights in the present and the future, such as the fight against discrimination. The international human rights system - its bodies, procedures and norms - was the silent partner behind the normative, jurisprudential and public policy developments in the field of human rights in Argentina, helping to rebuild the social and institutional fabric of my country.

Madam President,

2022 will be a year of **particular challenges** for the Human Rights Council. Before assuming the Presidency of this Council, let me share a brief reflection on some of those challenges, as well as some preliminary ideas for overcoming them collectively.

The **first challenge** is to reflect together on the responsibility of this Council from a **historical perspective**. Since the Peace of Westphalia and the rise of the nation-state as we know it today, international law did not take care of the people. For 300 years, the law legitimized and justified slavery, colonialism, torture, the persecution of minorities and the structural discrimination against women, making it possible for these practices to persist and that today we must eradicate. After the tragedy of the Holocaust, with the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948 and the norms and standards of protection that followed, we changed the paradigm of our international relations. We recognized that each and every person has rights that we must all collectively protect, beyond being nationals of one or another State, and even in cases where for some reason they are not subject to the jurisdiction of a state and have long been forgotten and deprived of their rights.

This international human rights law is only 76 years old. Therefore, from a relative historical perspective, what we are experiencing is the tip of the iceberg. It is enough to look at the issues we are addressing today in this Council, which would have been unthinkable in the international relations of that Westphalian State: climate change, discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity, violence and gender equality, business and human rights, human rights in the digital age, the rights of persons with disabilities and of the older persons, to give just a few examples. Much work remains to be done by the Human Rights Council.

In that context, a **second challenge** is the **politicization** of the Council. All the States agree that it is a growing phenomenon, and we are concerned that it could lead to a

polarization that would deteriorate and paralyze its work, as happened with the Commission. We must accept that human rights issues are part of the domestic and international political agenda. Yet, we must collectively ensure that human rights are not held hostage to geopolitical tensions, regardless of the reordering of global power relations. During the Cold War, human rights were violated on many occasions at the global level, under a biased vision of a supposed hierarchy among categories of rights. In 1993, in Vienna, we decided that all human rights - civil, political, social, economic and cultural - are universal, interdependent, indivisible and mutually reinforcing. This post-Cold War commitment is about to turn 30 years old in 2023, but we have not yet been able to put it fully into practice.

We have to take into account that in addition to these challenges, we have to make our utmost collective effort, if the epidemiological situation allows, to return to **in-person meetings** for the Council's sessions, resorting to virtual modalities only in unavoidable cases or when we have found it to be a valuable tool for our work. We need to return to in-person meetings for informal consultations to be able to exchange views, proposals, and dialogue and understand each other's positions. Virtual meetings make it difficult to go through the three stages of any successful negotiation thoroughly: expressing our wishes, communicating our positions, and reaching a consensus on our common interests.

I wish to share with you some proposals for **actions** in 2022, bearing in mind the sense of collective responsibility that should always guide our work in this body:

1. Let's generate in the Council a stable platform to increase dialogue and deepen the understanding of our commonalities and differences about human rights.

Each country faces its human rights challenges and develops a vision of the international system of promotion and protection according to its own historical, political and cultural context. Nevertheless, it is the people living under the jurisdiction of each of our States who are the holders of the rights that we are all collectively obliged to protect. It is not for us, the States, to interpret these rights: they exist beyond nationalities, cultures, religions or forms of political, social or economic organization.

I invite you to expand the knowledge and mutual understanding of our national realities. Leaving aside prejudices, paternalisms, stigmatizations or isolations, attitudes that in the end do not resolve the human rights situation in a country on the ground, no matter how serious it may be. Let's strengthen the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) to make it a fundamental tool in this regard.

2. Let's learn more about the multiple roles that civil society organizations can play in improving the situation of human rights, both at the global level and in each of our countries. The vast majority of NGOs and human rights defenders represent the victims who have no voice. Let's exchange experiences on how to achieve a mutually

beneficial and collaborative relationship between States and NGOs. Not only do they demand from us as States the fulfilment of our international human rights obligations, but also they have a space to collaborate with us in developing public policies, norms, and standards and participating in the implementation of the UPR recommendations.

3. **Let's generate a systemic reflection** in the Council in 2022 that strengthens the contribution of the Human Rights Council in conflict prevention and post-conflict reconstruction. The Security Council is the main body of the multilateral system that ensures international peace and security. However, before and after the intervention of the Security Council, human rights play a key role both in conflict prevention and in the post-conflict reconstruction of the social and institutional fabric. The respect for human rights in a society emerging from a collective trauma of massive violence and atrocities is the best guarantee of non-repetition. The year 2022 could be an opportunity to increase the contribution of the mechanisms of the Human Rights Council in this regard.

4. Finally, **let us strengthen cooperation** to incorporate the human rights perspective in a cross-cutting manner in our public policies, coordinating with the UN system agencies in our countries and following the UPR. The Council can play a key role as a catalyst for the experiences of States in human rights policies which will be the best guarantee to be able to comply with the 2030 Agenda. Moreover, it will maximize human and financial resources in a country with a human rights perspective.

These are my proposals and I hope to count on as many ideas as possible to strengthen and improve the role of the Council.

In closing, Madam President, distinguished colleagues, friends, I thank you once again for the trust you have placed in me to lead the work of this fundamental body of the multilateral system. I invite you to work collectively to achieve the full enjoyment of human rights throughout the world as an essential condition for maintaining international peace and security and achieving sustainable and inclusive development.

Thank you very much.