

The UN Secretary-General's Call to Action for Human Rights and the Prevention of Mass Atrocities

Today, 24 February, UN Secretary-General António Guterres released a “Call to Action for Human Rights.” The Secretary-General’s Call to Action is a long-overdue public commitment to lead in promoting and protecting human rights globally and in coordinating UN responses to situations where grave violations and abuses of human rights continue. But in order to effectively address protracted human rights crises around the world, the Call to Action must move beyond words and be expeditiously implemented.

Facing an unprecedented refugee and displacement crisis around the world – caused by atrocities, conflict and persecution - the Call to Action must generate consistent action across the UN system and be led by the Secretary-General himself. We are hopeful that the Call to Action will therefore eliminate a “business as usual” approach to these issues, replacing it with a renewed determination to pursue accountability for perpetrators of atrocity crimes, and to defend the institutions, norms and principles that promote human dignity and protect human rights.

As highlighted in the Call to Action, complex conflicts often provide early warning signs of war crimes, crimes against humanity and genocide. But around the world today the laws, institutions and individuals who defend human rights are under increasing threat. Ongoing war crimes in Syria, the mass internment of ethnic Uighur Muslims in China, and the genocide perpetrated against the Rohingya in Myanmar, all exemplify fundamental failures to prevent atrocities and to uphold universal rights. In implementing the Call to Action for Human Rights, the Secretary-General should now prioritize atrocity prevention and the improvement of the UN’s ability to react to emerging crises, in accordance with the recommendations of the Rosenthal Report.

Following the announcement of the Call to Action, Global Centre Executive Director Dr. Simon Adams said, “We welcome the Secretary-General’s Call to Action for Human Rights. Historically, nothing has tarnished the UN’s reputation more than the failure to protect civilians facing mass atrocity crimes. Today’s Call to Action is a reminder that the UN and the international community simply must do more to defend human rights and consistently uphold our collective responsibility to protect.”