

Permanent Representation of Belgium to the United Nations in Geneva

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| **Workshop on regional arrangements**Opening statement21-22 October 2019 |

Madam Deputy High Commissioner, Dear colleagues,

Ladies and gentlemen,

It gives me great pleasure to open this workshop on enhancing cooperation between the UN and the regional mechanisms for the promotion and protection of human rights. Many of you had to travel quite a bit to participate in this workshop and so I would like to start by welcoming you all to Geneva on this rainy day.

The reason that I am speaking here today, is because Belgium is a member of a cross-regional core group, consisting also of Armenia, Mexico, Senegal and Thailand, which actively advocates within the Human Rights Council to advance cooperation between international and regional human rights mechanisms.

The core group believes that regional and subregional human rights mechanisms have an important role to play in the promotion and protection of human rights. We believe there is no contradiction between the universal aspiration of Human rights and fundamental freedoms, as clearly follows from the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, on one hand and the regional dimensions of regional HR mechanisms on the other hand.

Regional courts and other semi-judicial bodies play a significant part in developing, implementing and otherwise shaping legal standards and reviewing law and policies in the field of human rights. Regional arrangements **help to** **localise** international human rights norms and standards, reflecting the particular concerns of a certain region. They also **help to** **implement** human rights on the ground. In that way they **help reinforce** universal human rights standards. For these reasons, regional arrangements should be supported to the fullest.

This idea is not new. The first resolution on regional arrangements was adopted by the General Assembly and already dates back to 1977. In 1993, the then Commission on Human Rights followed the example set by the General Assembly, by adopting the first of a number of resolutions on the subject, which inter alia requested the Secretary-General to continue to strengthen exchanges between the UN and regional intergovernmental organizations dealing with human rights. The Human Rights Council has continued to adopt resolutions on this issue requesting the Office of the UN High Commissioner of Human Rights to bring together regional and UN human rights mechanisms with a view to enhancing cooperation between them.

The idea was also taken up in the Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action, which was adopted by the World Conference on Human Rights in 1993, and which endorses efforts to establish, strengthen and increase the effectiveness of regional arrangements, while at the same time stressing the importance of their cooperation with the UN human rights system.

In this context the OHCHR held biennial workshops in November 2008, May 2010, December 2012, October 2014 and October 2016, with the participation of representatives of regional human rights mechanisms in Africa, Europe, the Americas, the Middle East and ASEAN; UN experts from the human rights treaty bodies and the HRC special procedures as well as National Human Rights Institutions and NGOs participated.

The workshops have focused on practical questions such as **how** to further the exchange of good practices, **what** added value regional arrangements have, **which** challenges and obstacles they face, and **how** to promote information-sharing. The workshops have also tackled substantive issues such as the prevention of torture, women’s and children’s rights, and economic, social and cultural rights, in particular of women and of persons with disabilities.

The latest workshop, in 2016, focused on interactions with civil society and human rights defenders. With the numbers of reprisals and intimidation on the rise, it was felt that this issue needed to be kept high on the agenda. The severity of the acts is also increasing. Reprisals take on different forms, from travel bans, threats and harassment, including by officials, smear campaigns, surveillance, introduction of restrictive legislation, to physical attacks, arbitrary arrest and detention, torture and ill-treatment, including sexual violence, denial of access to medical attention and even killings.

This year, your workshop is about the role of regional arrangements in the fight against racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance, and in the full and effective implementation of the Durban Declaration and Programme of Action.

It is the core group’s sincere hope that through the sharing of experiences, good practices and challenges common ideas and views can be generated in areas such as anti-racism legislation, transposition of relevant international provisions into national laws and public policies. Eighteen years after the Durban Declaration it is high time to step up our efforts, and the Deputy High Commissioner has made this abundantly clear!!

I wish you a fruitful workshop and very much look forward to seeing the results !!

Thank you.