

**8<sup>th</sup> International Conference on Human Rights Education “Bridging our Diversities”  
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**Opening remarks by Andrew Gilmour  
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It's a pleasure and an honour to be here. I have always thought human rights education was important, but now there is a particular need for it.

Two weeks ago, for this conference, I was asked to come up with a quote on the issue of human rights education. I said that human rights education is always important in terms of people learning their rights, but also to inspire them to stand up for the rights of others, especially now at a time of growing backlash against human rights.

I wanted to talk a little bit about that from my vantage point at the UN, and also from other countries that I have travelled to. I am not sure the human rights movement as a whole fully understands the extent to which the backlash is confronting us. Everyone knows we are up against serious threats, but whether they know the fully sense of the backlash is a different question.

Now, the backlash manifests itself in a range of ways. A troubling one is the way human rights NGOs around the world are getting squeezed. In country after country - for example Russia, Ethiopia, Israel, Turkey, Egypt, Hungary - laws have been passed that restrict the financing and the functioning of human rights defenders and NGOs.

Secondly, the way that courageous human rights defenders suffer reprisals. This is something that I have a particular interest in since I am the focal point for reprisals in the UN system. Many people have been targeted for cooperating with the UN. One tragic case that I am pursuing now is an Egyptian called Ibrahim Metwally. Three years ago, his son was taken from him, probably tortured to death. Ibrahim set up an organization for those who have disappeared. He was coming to Geneva for meetings with the UN. He was arrested at Cairo airport under the accusation of “terrorism” after he had criticized the disappearance of civilians.

We see the backlash in the scapegoating of minorities of all sorts, we see it in Europe, we see it in the United States, where Mexicans are vilified, and also Muslims. The word “deplorable” may have affected the US election a year ago, but it's too mild of a word to describe some of the tweets that have come out of the White House this week. The deliberate whipping up of hatred against minorities is a truly troubling phenomenon.

We have seen a serious backlash against women's rights in many countries, with the assumptions appearing to be that “women are supposed to know their place”, and “women are supposed to no longer have control of their bodies”. We see a backlash against LGBTI rights, which seems paradoxical given that there has been such progress in gay marriage in North America, Latin America and Europe. But elsewhere, in Russia, Iraq, in Africa, in the Middle East, LGBTI rights have actually gone backwards.

On issue after issue, there is a step back, including counterterrorism. I've been in the last year to many countries and have previously worked in other countries that are involved in fighting against terrorism. But it seems remarkable to me how frequently countries that say they fight terrorism do it in such a brutal way that they end up creating more terrorists than there were in the first place. As counter-terrorism becomes the discourse, the temptation is to squeeze human rights at home. I saw that in my own country, the UK. A few months ago during the election campaign, the Prime Minister said that if human rights laws got in the way of counter-terrorism, then we should just put human rights laws away. That sent a terrible signal to authoritarians around the globe that even a major Western leader could use human rights laws as some sort of scapegoat for the failure to deal with terrorism.

In short, I see the current global backlash against human rights as a reason why we need more education on this. Human rights have sometimes been presented as an interference in a country's internal matters; or as a way of overthrowing regimes you do not like; or a way of imposing Western values on a country that does not want it. Or even if you do not use any of those excuses, it is striking how many people try to treat human rights as just something as a luxury, something you can have only after you have brought conflict to an end or brought security or somehow delivered development. It is a luxury they say, but we say it is not. After all, you cannot have sustainable development, you cannot have peace unless they are grounded in human rights.

This is a summary of the backlash in three minutes. What can we do about it? Now, there are not that many avenues. It is depressing in a way, when we see the enormity of the challenge, and how few tools we have to confront it. One is speaking up much more than people have done perhaps. Two is to make a big effort to defend the defenders to make sure that those brave - and in many cases heroic - defenders on the frontline receive better support. The third is human rights education and this is the great importance of this meeting, I believe. Because what we are trying to do and we need to do is not only for people to have a better understanding of human rights, but to see how to enlarge the constituency.

As I travel around the world, I see that human rights is portrayed sometimes as a niche topic. We defend prisoners as we ought to do, but in countries where there is very little sympathy for prisoners that does not transcend the human rights movement into the general population. While in no way losing the focus on particular rules - whether it is LGBTI people, those with disabilities, prisoners, indigenous - human rights education does need to show to people who consider themselves "ordinary" people that actually human rights have a relevance for them as well.

We as a movement, I think, have not yet handled that sufficiently and as a result, we are on the backfoot against the populists, the authoritarians, those who deliberately whip up prejudice against other people. That is why I think we have to really focus on human rights education and learning - it is one of the few tools we have. The backlash is real and let us use education as a major way of trying to resist and reverse it.

Thank you.