

Joint Statement on Recent Violent Escalations During Youth-led Protests around the World

In the past few months, the world has witnessed an upsurge in protests against systemic inequality as well as racial and gender-based violence. Widespread violations of human rights, including limited freedoms and systematic exclusion in political decision-making processes have fuelled feelings of frustration and mistrust among young people who are increasingly taking to the streets, demanding to be heard.

The Secretary-General's Envoy on Youth is concerned by the repressive response to ongoing movements worldwide — including those in Belarus, China/Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, Nigeria and Thailand — where large populations of young people are raising their voices for democracy, freedom and respect for the human rights of all. The Special Rapporteur on the Promotion and Protection of Freedom of Opinion and Expression, the Special Rapporteur on the Rights to Freedom of Peaceful Assembly and of Association and the Special Rapporteur on Extrajudicial, Summary or Arbitrary Executions previously shared concerns at a number of human rights violations in these contexts,¹ and reiterate their call for greater respect of the rights of youth to freedom of expression, peaceful assembly and public participation.

The rights to freedom of expression, freedom of peaceful assembly and freedom of association are human rights that belong to everyone equally under the international human rights law. The Envoy on Youth, together with the above-mentioned Special Rapporteurs, are gravely concerned by increasing reports of arbitrary detentions, unfair trials, police brutality, harassment and other human rights violations of young people who have been participating in ongoing peaceful protests, and strongly condemn this conduct.

They urge the relevant governments and authorities to swiftly and thoroughly investigate cases of violence against peaceful protesters, including young people, hold the perpetrators accountable and call for the immediate demilitarization of police during public protests. Law enforcement must adhere to international human rights law and other relevant internationally agreed standards when devising solutions to address the requests and needs of young people. To rebuild trust in formal institutions and build social cohesion, it is crucial for the relevant state and non-state actors to publicly condemn the unlawful treatment that youth activists

¹ *UN Human Rights Experts: Belarus Must Stop Torturing Protesters and Prevent Enforced Disappearances*, 1 September 2020, available at: <https://www.ohchr.org/en/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=26199&LangID=E> [accessed 26 October 2020]; *Hong Kong Urged Not to Silence Peaceful Protest with Criminal Charges*, 13 May 2020, available at: <https://www.ohchr.org/en/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=25880&LangID=E>; *UN Experts Urge Thai Government to Allow Peaceful Protests and Release Unconditionally those Arbitrarily Detained*, 22 October 2020, available at: <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=26408&LangID=E> [accessed 26 October 2020]; *Nigeria Needs Urgent Action to End "Pressure Cooker" of Violence Claiming Thousands of Lives, Says UN Rights Expert*, 3 September 2019, available at: <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=24938&LangID=E> [accessed 26 October 2020].

continue to face and prohibit targeting of young people who are peacefully exercising their rights around the world.

Additionally, as the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet noted in her recent statement addressing the situation in Nigeria and the violence against young people, there needs to be “a root and branch re-examination of the entire security sector, and of its civilian oversight... This should include a full-scale review of rules of engagement and training systems and methods.”² Such examination of the current structures of institutionalized security practices should apply to all cases where youth-led protests resulted in disproportionate use of force by law enforcement officials and should include youth meaningfully in the review processes.

Although youth are often stereotyped as trouble-makers, perpetrators of violence and passive actors in public spheres, the reality is that the majority of young people want to engage in a constructive and peaceful conversation with leaders and decision and policy makers and to be involved in building a better future for themselves and future generations.³ States must create space for young people to participate in shaping their own future. A discussion of a future agenda must focus on addressing the challenges faced by young people in exercising their rights including freedom of peaceful assembly and of association.⁴ The Secretary-General’s Envoy on Youth and the Special Rapporteurs stand in solidarity with all young people protesting peacefully around the world and call for their inclusion in meaningful dialogues so that their grievances and demands for more just societies will be heard.

² UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, *Nigeria: Bachelet Condemns Army Killings, Calls for “Root and Branch” Reform of the Security Forces*, 21 October 2020, available at:

<https://www.ohchr.org/SP/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=26405&LangID=E> [accessed 26 October 2020].

³ Graeme Simpson, *The Missing Peace: Independent Progress Study on Youth, Peace and Security*, 2018, available at: <https://www.youth4peace.info/system/files/2018-10/youth-web-english.pdf> [accessed 23 October 2020].

⁴ Ten years protecting civic space worldwide. Report of the Special Rapporteur on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association. A/HRC/44/50, para.66, available at: <https://undocs.org/A/HRC/44/50> [accessed 26 October 2020].