

14TH INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE OF NATIONAL HUMAN RIGHTS

INSTITUTIONS

*Torture and other ill-treatment: The role of National Human Rights Institutions*

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Opening remarks by

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*Delivered via video link*

Excellencies, Ladies and gentlemen,

This 14th International Conference of National Human Rights Institutions with its focus on Torture and Other Ill-Treatment comes at a timely moment.

The world is facing the highest number of violent conflicts since the Second World War and 2 billion people — a quarter of humanity — today live in places affected by conflict.[[1]](#footnote-1)

At the same time, there are many other countries that have recovered from conflict, or are walking the long path to peace, democracy and human rights, that are adjusting to their new realities. These countries must put in place guardrails against repetition, and bring justice to victims, families and societies.

And then there are the countries – a growing group – that were once stable democracies yet are turning to popularism and exchanging the rule of law for power politics and division. Repression of the human right to assemble and protest, to hold a contrary opinion, and to live without fear, are at risk in a number of countries. In the OSCE region as well as globally, threats to NHRIs are well documented. They can take hidden and open forms. For example, budget and staff cuts, smear campaigns, or infringements in selection and appointment procedures negatively impact the work of NHRIs around the world.[[2]](#footnote-2) In some countries, verbal and physical attacks of staff of NHRIs and active obstruction of investigations, are worrying signs.

In all the three scenarios I’ve identified, the risk of torture and other ill-treatment is ever-present. As I reported to the UN General Assembly last month, there has been a spike in cases of torture in the past year ([A/78/324](https://www.ohchr.org/en/documents/thematic-reports/a78324-thematic-study-global-trade-weapons-equipment-and-devices-used)). That is a terrible indictment on where the world is at right now.

Torture has a long history of being used to disrupt peace and create uncertainty, and even minor abuses of power should put us all on notice that worse may be on the horizon. Allegations of torture or ill-treatment cannot be left uninvestigated.

Notwithstanding this extremely bleak picture, there are actions we can take, and I take this opportunity to address the important role of national human rights institutions.

National Human Rights Institutions (NHRIs) play a pivotal role in addressing this heinous crime.

NHRIs are designed to act as a bridge between the government and civil society, advocating for human rights, conducting investigations, and recommending necessary changes in policies and legislation. Their role in combating torture is multifaceted.

They act as watchdogs, advocates, and support systems for victims, all while pressuring governments to prevent torture and hold perpetrators accountable. The eradication of torture is a moral imperative, and NHRIs are at the forefront of this crucial endeavour.

However, the effectiveness of NHRIs depends on their independence, resources, and the political will of the governments that establish them.

They are an indispensable element of the global fight against torture, which needs to operate actively and preventatively in peacetime, and robustly during wartime.

NHRIs must stay attuned to risks and patterns of ill-treatment. They must listen to what is being told to them. Oftentimes, NHRIs – and sometimes in the form of national preventive mechanisms - are the only entity visiting the closed places where torture is most likely, and that comes with great responsibility.

Regarding the specific context of wartime, let me say a couple of things. The personnel of national human rights institutions may be challenged to continue adhering to foundational principles of independence and impartiality when confronted with such situations, but never have such principles been so important.

In the pursuit of justice and peace, NHRIs can be important brokers of that peace. They can promote dialogue between the parties and participate in peace efforts. They can promote and monitor adherence to the laws of war. They can train combatants in observance of human rights and humanitarian law standards. They can gather and circulate information on alleged violations, committed by all sides of a conflict. And they can provide safe spaces for victims and survivors to report.

It is our collective responsibility to support and strengthen these institutions to ensure that they can continue to protect human rights and work towards a world free from torture.

Finally, ladies and gentlemen, let me say an enormous thank you to all of you present, representing NHRIs from many countries. I thank you - For turning up. For turning the light onto issues of torture and ill-treatment. And for not turning away even though the work to address torture can be so very intense and difficult.

Thank you. I wish you all the best in your deliberations.

ENDS

1. UN Meetings Coverage and Press Release, With Highest Number of Violent Conflicts Since Second World War, United Nations Must Rethink Efforts to Achieve, Sustain Peace, Speakers Tell Security Council, 26, January 2023, <https://press.un.org/en/2023/sc15184.doc.htm> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. OSCE & ODIHR, Strengthening the Resilience of NHRIs and Responding to Threats Guidance Tool 2022, p. 12, <https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/5/6/524340.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)