*Check against delivery*

**Human Rights Council 31st Session**

**Annual Debate on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities**



**Opening Statement by**

**Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein**

**United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights**

**4 March 2016**

**9:00-12:00, Room XX, Palais des Nations**

Mr President,

Excellencies,

Colleagues and Friends,

This is the first time I will address the Council on the key issue of the rights of persons with disabilities, and I am particularly pleased that our discussion will be emphasising the rights of people living in high-risk and emergency situations, including natural disasters.

Today's very grim humanitarian landscape includes an almost unmanageable number of crises, with the UN struggling to meet the needs of simultaneous emergencies in Syria; Iraq; South Sudan; Yemen; Burundi and the Central African Republic; in the countries around Lake Chad which have suffered the attacks of Boko Haram; in the Democratic Republic of Congo; in Libya; in Mali; in the Occupied Palestinian Territory; in Somalia; in Sudan; and in Ukraine.

Many of these are brutal internal conflicts that are characterised by shocking disregard for fundamental norms regarding the protection of civilians.

In addition, the escalating pace of climate change means that we are also seeing very serious natural disasters in many parts of the world.

In all these conflict and emergency situations, people with disabilities are often disproportionately, and acutely, at risk. Social attitudes towards this population, and physical and communication barriers, compound the dangers they face.

Vital emergency assistance, accessible means of communication on early warning, and basic equipment for independence such as prosthetic limbs, personal support and assistive devices, may not be made available in conflict zones, meaning that many persons with disabilities are not properly supported, and are rendered immobile. They are therefore unable to gain access to food aid distribution points, evacuation procedures, or shelters – facilities whose planning and operation may never have considered the need for accessibility to persons with disabilities.

In situations of imminent danger, families may face an impossible choice: to flee as fast as possible may mean that they must leave a family member with disability behind them; to carry the person will slow them down and endanger them all. But the person left behind will have no access to humanitarian aid, basic care or emergency assistance, and may be subjected to torture, sexual violence or murder.

When they do manage to flee conflict, emergencies or disasters, persons with disabilities may not be given the assistance that they require, and which is their right. On the contrary, emergency responses too often fail to plan for adequate and accessible facilities, social services or evacuation processes, frequently because their organisers have not enabled persons with disabilities to participate in planning. Even within shelters, persons with disabilities are disproportionately at risk of being neglected, excluded or abused – and this particularly true of women and children with disabilities.

This is an appalling violation of the most fundamental human rights principles. Everyone affected by a disaster has the right to receive protection and assistance, and the inclusion of persons with disabilities should be viewed as a normal, and indeed vital, part of any humanitarian response.

Mr President,

Ten years ago, the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities operated a sea-change in the approach to persons with disabilities in international law. Previously viewed as objects of international charity, they became fully equal subjects of law – people with the same rights as all other members of society. The Convention detailed, clearly and unconditionally, that persons with disabilities must have full and effective enjoyment of all human rights – including the removal of barriers which exclude them from equally participating in society.

Over the past decade, the work of the Committee has helped to create far greater empowerment of persons with disabilities and their organizations, many of whom can now advocate and claim their rights. We are seeing much-increased efforts in many States to mainstream persons with disabilities across development policies and programmes, and strong improvements in collection of data that is disaggregated by disability, in order to better design and implement policies and programmes.

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development represents a large step forward for the equal rights of people with disabilities. Goal 4, on education, calls for accessible and inclusive education facilities which provide safe, non-violent, quality and effective learning environments for all. Goal 8 aims to achieve full and productive employment for all women and men, including for people with disabilities. Goal 10 strives to reduce inequality within and among countries through social, economic and political participation by all, including people with disabilities. Goal 11 calls for inclusive, safe and sustainable cities and human settlements, with transport systems that meet the needs of those in vulnerable situations, such as people with disabilities. And Goal 17, on data and accountability, will significantly improve the availability of disaggregated data, making persons with disabilities far more "visible" to planners. I commend the work of the Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities who advocated for stronger references to persons with disabilities in the Agenda, and for the adoption of indicators to measure progress in implementing the SDGs in relation to persons with disabilities.

Implementation of the 2030 Agenda will strongly contribute to building the resilience and voice of people with disabilities. I encourage member States to involve persons with disabilities in the reporting processes towards the first review, which will be undertaken by the High-Level Political Forum in July, and to carry forward this good practise.

In recent years we have also seen heightened attention to the rights of persons with disabilities by the Security Council, many regional organizations and the United Nations humanitarian system as a whole. Thus the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction, adopted last year, contains vital steps towards greater inclusion of persons with disabilities in programmes and measures designed to prevent, or minimize the risk, of disasters.

The full implementation of the Sendai Framework by all its signatories will have major positive impact. But we also need much greater focus on the needs and voices of personse with disabilities in programmes and planning for emergency responses, as well as for social inclusion and reconstruction. Measures must be taken to reduce marginalization, increase access, dismantle barriers and improve participation for persons with disabilities and organizations of persons with disabilities. To improve our responses to conflict, emergencies and disasters, it is vital that people with disabilities, and the organizations which represent them, can participate in designing, implementing, supervising and evaluating assistance programmes.

Mr. President,

The World Humanitarian Summit in May offers us an opportunity to not only raise awareness of the challenges faced by persons with disabilities, but also to take real steps towards change. We need high-level political support at the international level in order to promote the funding, and the acceptance of internationally agreed principles and guidelines, which will enable humanitarian field operations to respond adequately to their needs and rights.

This Council has acknowledged the need to evaluate the progress on disability that has taken place over the past decade. October's Social Forum will review the achievements obtained over the past decade, and identify key challenges for years to come under the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. I encourage States to support the broad participation of civil society groups in that Forum, so that we can continue to advance the human rights of persons with disabilities.

This Council and its Member States can also actively engage in promoting the full enjoyment of all human rights for all people with disabilities. Many of the barriers they face are entirely avoidable – not only in the course of emergency management, but also more broadly, in every social context. Discrimination against persons with disabilities is intolerable, and by preventing them from sharing in the common tasks of society, it harms us all.

I look forward to your discussions.

Thank you.