

Madam Vice-Rector,
Excellencies,
Distinguished guests,
Dear Dean,
Dear colleagues, dear students,
Ladies and gentlemen,

We are very honoured today and we extend a warm welcome to H.E. Mr. Volker Türk, the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, at this critical juncture in global affairs. Mr. Türk assumed his official duties in October 2022 and has committed his extensive and distinguished career to the promotion of human rights, with particular emphasis on the international protection of some of the most vulnerable populations, including refugees and stateless persons.

As an international lawyer, I would like to underscore that Mr. Türk originates from the illustrious legal School of Vienna, which has significantly influenced contemporary international law. Mr. Türk possesses a PhD in international law from the University of Vienna and a Master of Laws degree from the University of Linz. In addition to his doctoral thesis which focused on the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and its mandate,¹ Mr. Türk has an extensive publication record in the fields of international refugee law and international human rights law.

¹ Volker Türk, *Das Flüchtlingshochkommissariat der Vereinten Nationen (UNHCR)*, Berlin: Duncker und Humblot, 1992.

Prior to assuming his current position, Mr. Türk served as the Under-Secretary-General for Policy in the Executive Office of the United Nations Secretary-General, where he was responsible for coordinating global policy initiatives. He played a pivotal role in facilitating collaboration across the UN system in relation to the Secretary-General's "Call to Action for Human Rights" as well as his report, "Our Common Agenda," which presents a comprehensive strategy for addressing the world's interconnected challenges through the principles of trust, solidarity, and human rights.

Furthermore, he previously held the key position of Assistant Secretary-General for Strategic Coordination in the Executive Office of the Secretary-General from 2019 to 2021.

In his role as Assistant High Commissioner for Protection at the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) from 2015 to 2019, Mr. Türk made significant contributions to the development of the landmark Global Compact on Refugees. Throughout his distinguished career, he has held several key positions within UNHCR, including Director of the Division of International Protection from 2009 to 2015, Director of Organizational Development and Management from 2008 to 2009, and Chief of Section for Protection Policy and Legal Advice from 2000 to 2004. Additionally, Mr. Türk has served UNHCR in various challenging assignments, including as Representative in Malaysia, Assistant Chief of Mission in Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina, and as Regional Protection Coordinator in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Kuwait.

The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights stands at the pinnacle of the United Nations human rights system.

The initial germ of the idea of an “Attorney General for Human Rights is traced back to 1947, during the drafting of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. It was, however, only in 1993 that the UN General Assembly Resolution 48/141 eventually created the post of High Commissioner for Human Rights as the “*United Nations official with principal responsibility for United Nations human rights activities*”. The High Commissioner for Human Rights is appointed by the Secretary-General of the United Nations, and approved by the General Assembly, for a fixed term of 4 years with a possibility of one renewal, and with the rank of Under-Secretary-General. The High Commissioner's responsibilities are to “*promote universal respect for and observance of all human rights*”, i.e. civil, cultural, economic, political and social rights, including the right to development.

It is evident that, in the current tumultuous circumstances the world faces, the role of the High Commissioner for Human Rights assumes particular significance. It is imperative to recognize that the High Commissioner functions as a moral authority and a representative voice for victims of human rights violations. The High Commissioner plays a critical role in guiding the Office’s mission and values, identifying strategic priorities, and directing its activities.

Additionally, the High Commissioner is responsible for making public statements and appeals concerning human rights situations and crises, engaging in constructive dialogue with governments to enhance national human rights protection, and undertaking extensive travel to ensure that human rights messages resonate across all regions of the world. This engagement includes listening to those whose rights have been denied and interacting with those in positions of responsibility.

Furthermore, the High Commissioner endeavors to integrate human rights standards across all United Nations programs, ensuring that peace and security, development, and human rights—the three essential pillars of the United Nations system—remain interlinked and mutually reinforcing. It is vital that human rights serve as the foundational bedrock upon which all United Nations activities are built.

Furthermore, the support of the High Commissioner for the work of the UN human rights treaty bodies is crucial for their effectiveness. I personally witnessed this importance when I served as a member of the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination.

As the High Commissioner speaks openly and publicly about the global protection level of human rights and combats impunity, the work of the High Commissioner and the Office has expectedly attracted criticism and/or backlash. Indeed, the institution was brutally attacked back in 2003, when the then High Commissioner, Sergio Vieira de Mello, together with 21 of his colleagues, were victims of a bomb attack on the UN's headquarters in Baghdad, Iraq, on the afternoon of 19 August 2003. The Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD) was in session when the tragic event was announced. I will never forget the absolute silence in the room and the profound sadness and helplessness of us all.

During turbulent times for international peace and security, the role of the High Commissioner in “*meeting the challenges to the full realization of all human rights and in preventing the continuation of human rights violations throughout the world*”, as General Assembly Resolution 48/141 mandates, becomes

even more vital. Contemporary challenges to the enjoyment of human rights are more pressing than at any previous time in recent history. Ongoing and/or protracted conflicts in the Middle East, in Ukraine, Sudan, Myanmar, Ethiopia, and the Sahel, all inflict tremendous human suffering to civilian populations.

But even apart from international peace and security, further and important human rights challenges continuously flourish. With respect to the protection of the human right to a safe, clean, healthy and sustainable environment, governments are grappling with the consequences of the hottest year on record, facing an onslaught of wildfires, droughts, and storms that have wreaked havoc on millions of individuals in countries such as Bangladesh, Libya, and Canada. The rights of women have encountered substantial challenges in numerous regions, epitomized by the Taliban's gender-based persecution in Afghanistan. Human rights legal instruments serve as reliable mechanisms to provide effective protection to victims. Today, the role of the High Commissioner is and must be that of a human rights advocate, a "human face for human rights"², which the world needs perhaps more than ever.

It is not coincidental that many recent or ongoing armed conflicts in Europe have led to inter-state cases before the European Court of Human Rights. Concurrently, in recognition of the universality and *erga omnes partes* character of human rights obligations, states increasingly utilize major human rights treaties as a jurisdictional basis to pursue accountability for gross human rights violations before the International Court of Justice (ICJ).

² Harold Hongju Koh, "A Job Description for the U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights", *Columbia Human Rights Law Review* 35, no. 3 (Summer 2004), 495.

The Genocide Convention, the Convention against Torture and the International Convention on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination are today invoked in relation to pending cases concerning the situation in Ukraine, in the Gaza strip, in Myanmar, in Syria or in Nagorno Karabakh. This is an unprecedented phenomenon in the history of the ICJ, the principal judicial organ of the United Nations. It demonstrates the centrality of Human Rights in the current context.

It is thus with great interest that we shall listen to the keynote speech of the High Commissioner on this very subject. I thank you for your kind attention and I kindly invite H. E. Mr Volker Türk to the podium.