



EUSR for Human Rights – Newsletter – December 2024

In December we paid tribute to the work of **human rights defenders** in the celebration of International Human Rights Day. I continue to be impressed by the courage and compassion of individuals working to advance human rights around the globe. It is easy to be disillusioned by what at first sight looks like a bleak outlook for human rights and dignity around the world. But sometimes change happens fast and where we least expect it. Years of dedicated work and sacrifice leads to ground breaking change. The demise of the Bashar Al-Assad regime demonstrates once again how authoritarian systems based on oppression will always fail and eventually fall. Democratic checks and balances are being played out in the **Republic of Korea**, and the **US** is preparing for a peaceful democratic transition. **Zimbabwe** has abolished the death penalty. Dedicated human rights work pays off. Another example this month was the hearings in the ICJ on the Advisory Opinion to clarify the human rights obligations of States in relation to **climate change**. A petition initiated by youth groups in Vanuatu directly affected by climate change, will now advance our understanding of human rights law in relation to climate change.

In December, the new High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy/Vice-President of the European Commission (HR/VP) Kaja Kallas took up office. She didn't waste any time to actively engage with partners around the globe, starting in Kyiv and then the Middle East. She is a strong supporter of the EU's human rights priorities and I look forward to supporting her in this regard.

In December, I co-hosted Human Rights Dialogues with two important countries, Mexico and Saudi Arabia.

MAJOR EVENTS

In a historic event, the **regime of Bashar Al-Assad** was overthrown, which provides a major window of opportunity in the area of **justice and accountability** for crimes committed by all parties, including to uncover the fate of over 150,000 missing persons since the beginning of the conflict. Accountability was identified as one of the EU's priority areas by HR/VP Kallas during her mission to Jordan to engage on Syria as well as in the 16 December Foreign Affairs Council conclusions.

As the world has witnessed the horrors of places like Sednaya prison (the "human slaughterhouse") or the mass graves unveiled close to Qutayfah and Najha, my office has been discussing the key needs in the area of accountability with a range of stakeholders, and we are available to support as needed, including through the Impartial and Independent Mechanism (IIIM), Commission of Inquiry (CoI) and the new Independent Institution on Missing Persons (IIMP), set up through joint efforts in the UN. Universal jurisdiction in EU member states can support these efforts.

It is also key that we continue to consult and **engage with civil society**, to understand the needs and local capacities in this area, which should also be supported, including in view of a Syrian-led and Syrian owned inclusive transition which ensures the full effective and meaningful participation of women and all communities in Syria. We must further keep an eye on events unfolding in the Golan and in the north of Syria, where violence and displacement – including of national minorities - continue.

A fragile ceasefire between **Israel and Lebanon** was reached, but breaches have been widely reported, and the situation of displaced populations continues to be dire. Meanwhile, efforts are still underway towards a ceasefire in **Gaza**, which is crucial to provide relief to a devastated population. In any case, it bears reminding that in the absence of a definitive end of hostilities, International Humanitarian Law continues to apply. It includes binding rules for the protection of hospitals and medical personnel. The detention of Dr Abu Safiya, Director of the Kamal Adwan, the last partially functioning hospital in Northern Gaza, has raised further concerns in this regard. I discussed the situation in both Gaza and the West Bank with the new Palestinian Ambassador here in Belgium, Dr. Amal Jadou.

Georgia has been closely associated with the EU, and has been offered to become part of our family of member states one day. The recent course of action pursued by the government runs contrary to the founding values of the EU, but even more importantly, to Georgia's own domestic, regional and international human rights obligations. The EU has urged the government to immediately end violence against peaceful protestors, politicians and media authorities. All the reported violations of human rights must be investigated and those responsible held to account.

As the date for the contested presidential inauguration in **Venezuela** approaches, the news of a re-establishment of the UN Human Rights presence in Venezuela is invaluable. I have reiterated the importance of this human rights monitoring presence on the ground in all of my engagements on Venezuela, including with regional partners. It is now crucial that the UN Human Rights Office can operate freely in all of the territory. I also welcome the recent release of persons arbitrarily detained in the context of the July presidential elections, mindful that the risk of recurrence is imminent, as new protests have been called ahead of the presidential inauguration on January 10. The exchanges that my office has held with the UN Fact-Finding Mission on Venezuela and Venezuelan human rights defenders in exile this month bear witness to prevailing serious limitations to freedom of expression and assembly.

SUDAN

Beyond the daily headlines, there are human rights disasters that barely go noticed. The situation in **Sudan** is without a doubt the worst ongoing humanitarian crisis with hundred thousand killed, and millions displaced since 2023, garnering far too little attention and response. Across the country, nearly 26 million people - around half the population - are facing acute hunger, according to the United Nations. Sexual and gender-based violence is rampant, with 6.7 million persons at risk. The warring sides' blatant disregard for international human rights and international humanitarian law, results in enormous suffering for the civilian population.

The EU is putting maximum efforts to provide humanitarian aid, including ensuring protection of civilians and of civilian infrastructure, to support diplomatic efforts for a cessation of hostilities and to advance accountability. We have adopted sanctions against entities and individuals responsible for grave human rights violations under the EU Human Rights Sanctions Regime, as an avenue for accountability. These are complimentary to the crucial work by the ICC and UN. A political solution to the conflict is urgently needed and must be vigorously pursued, including by neighbouring states and regional actors, preferably with the UN in the lead. Preparing for accountability should go hand in hand with such efforts. Sudan must be high on the agenda for 2025.

We should also not forget that the enormous suffering of the **Sudanese** people extends well beyond the borders of their war-torn country. It is estimated that 3 million out of the 12 million displaced Sudanese have fled the country in order to seek refuge in neighbouring states. Too often, however, they find themselves in equally difficult situations, facing deportation, being left in the desert, or

placed in displacement camps, where cases of murder, rape and forced labour are reported on a daily basis. The situation of the Sudanese refugees in the North African countries is especially dire.

Migration and Human Rights of Migrants remains a very important aspect of EU internal deliberations and a central topic of our Strategic and Comprehensive Partnerships agreements around the world, where there are lessons to be drawn.

BILATERAL ENGAGEMENTS

I co-hosted the **XII EU-Mexico Human Rights Dialogue** together with Vice-Minister Enrique Ochoa in Brussels in December. It was a truly exemplary dialogue, thanks to the constructive engagement of civil society organisations and the great openness from Mexico to address domestic human rights challenges, including the protection of human rights defenders and enforced disappearances. We agreed on a series of concrete measures to advance gender equality and connectivity and to share experiences on migration. Mexico is a strategic partner to the EU and a key actor in multilateral cooperation for the protection of the universality of human rights. It is a great asset in these troublesome times that Mexico has been elected for a seat at the Human Rights Council from 2025. We intend to work together to ensure that the human rights agenda is a truly global one, countering the intents to politicize and saw rifts between countries from the Northern and Southern hemisphere.

On 17 December, I also co-chaired the **IV Annual Human Rights Dialogue with Saudi Arabia**, held in Riyadh. Overall, Saudi Arabia showed willingness to engage openly on all issues of concern raised such as the death penalty and the alarming surge in executions in 2024, limitations on freedom of expression and on particularly aggravating individual cases of concern. We remain hopeful on possible prison releases in the near future. The Human Rights Commission have committed to provide detailed information on individuals detained and raised during the Dialogue and to engage with the EU on human rights also in-between Dialogue meetings. This includes to look into improved process for the EU to observe public trials, to improve cooperation in multilateral fora, to engage actively with the UN system, notably with ILO and OHCHR, as well as to deepen exchanges with the EU on issues such as business and human rights, new technologies and gender equality. I also encouraged my counterpart at this Dialogue, the Saudi Human Rights Commission, to invite international civil society organisations for regular consultations. In a meeting with State Minister Al Jubeir, I exchanged on the situation in the region, in Syria, Israel, Palestine, and Iran. As I highlighted in an interview with [Arab News](#) during the visit, progress on human rights, not least as regards rights for women and girls, are likely to be irreversible due to the demands from the younger generation of Saudis. The World Cup, and preparations for it, will inevitably lead to increasing scrutiny also of labour conditions, something we discussed during my visit.

Since assuming my mandate, I have advocated for a closer human rights cooperation and engagement with our partners countries and important regional players. In early December, and as a follow up to our revived Dialogue on Human Rights, I participated in an informal meeting in Florence, Italy aiming to promote better understanding between the EU and **Indonesia**, including on human rights, with the presence of diplomats, academia, think-tankers and businesses from both sides.

INTERNAL ENGAGEMENT

On 5 December 2024, I had an exchange of views with the **European Parliament Subcommittee on Human Rights (DROI)**. The European Parliament, often described as the voice of the European citizens, plays a key role in conveying human rights messages, most notably in the form of human rights and democracy resolutions. I emphasized that human rights are a strategic interest of the EU, and that it is key to work together with the Parliament to advance them worldwide and to ensure a consistent

EU approach. I also had the honour to join the high-level conference of the **Belarus** Days hosted by the President of the European Parliament, Roberta Metsola. Speaking alongside Tatsiana Komich, the sister of Maryia Kalesnikava who is one of 1200f political prisoners, I stressed the need for continued support to political prisoners and their families.

Part of my mandate is to contribute to better coherence and consistency in EU human rights policy and establish a stronger European voice on human rights. Together with EU Special Envoy for Digital Diplomacy, Peter Sørensen, I convened experts inside the EU system for an exchange on EU policy to safeguard human rights and international human rights law in relation to **emerging technologies** with experts from the UN Human Rights Office, ICRC and civil society. In my external interactions, it is evident that governments around the world are drawing inspiration from the EUs legislative frameworks like the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) on data protection, Digital Services Act and Digital Markets Act on content moderation, and the AI Act establishing a risk-based approach for the responsible development and use of AI. Regulation of digital technology requires a human rights based approach with adequate safeguards and corrective mechanisms, otherwise it risks contributing to censorship, surveillance and violations of privacy. Part of the EUs human rights agenda is promoting connectivity and preventing shutdowns, as connectivity has become a prerequisite for the full enjoyment of human rights in many contexts. Even in situations of conflict and crisis, an internet connection is vital to reconnect with family members and access safety information.

This month I also held an exchange with the **EU Working Group on Human Rights (COHOM)** with whom I have the pleasure to work on the implementation of the EU Action Plan on Human Rights. We had a constructive exchange, stressing the need for a Team Europe approach with a shared responsibility and interest to promote human rights from high-level summits to our local presences around the world.

HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS

Among the individual cases brought to my attention this month, I was devastated to learn of the death of **Manuel Esplugas** in prison in Cuba. I have also received reports of ill-treatment of political prisoner **Jose Daniel Ferrer**. In a more positive development, on 15 December, Bahrain's King Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa issued a royal pardon for 896 inmates. I continue to encourage the release of persons held for exercising and campaigning for human rights in Bahrain, including **Abdulhadi al-Khawaja** whose daughter I met earlier that month, and I raise this issue in all my engagements with the authorities. My office has been informed that in Egypt a senior Baha'i official, **Omid Seioshansian**, was forcibly detained and disappeared at Cairo International Airport, and that human rights defender **Mona Abdelmoneim** was recycled into yet another case and **Alaa Abd el-Fattah** remains detained despite having completed his five-year prison sentence in September.

The EU's relations across **Central Asia** have deepened in recent years, to which outgoing EU Special Representative for Central Asia, Terhi Hakala, has greatly contributed. Cooperation on human rights has improved and I see important potential to pursue this trend. I was able to visit Turkmenistan in 2024 and hope to visit other Central Asian countries this year. The region benefits from the wealth of expertise and experience by civil society, although civic space remains limited. In December, civil society raised with me concerns on individual cases, among others, the situation of lawyers defending clients in politically sensitive cases in Kyrgyzstan, imprisoned activists in Tajikistan, and the human rights defenders I engaged with in Turkmenistan earlier this year.

LOOKING AHEAD

I am busy planning my visits and engagements in 2025. My first mission this year will lead to Pakistan at the end of January.

From now onwards, you will be able to read the newsletter and other updates from my office on our brand [new website](#).

Olof Skoog

EU Special Representative for Human Rights