

**STATEMENT BY H.E. MR. MIROSLAV LAJČÁK, PRESIDENT OF THE
72ND SESSION OF THE UN GENERAL ASSEMBLY, AT HUMAN RIGHTS
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Ladies and Gentlemen,

Thank you, Assistant-Secretary-General Gilmour. Thanks also to Secretary-General Guterres, for his stirring remarks, and to my other, esteemed colleagues for their participation.

I am glad to be able to address to you, for this year's Human Rights Day. I want to sincerely thank the *Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights* for organising this event. It is intended to celebrate, to commemorate and to inspire.

As you know, the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* was adopted in 1948. This was a milestone for the United Nations General Assembly – and for humanity. But it did not *create* human rights. They existed before this. Not on paper – but in people. In fact, human rights are an inherent part of humanity. And they always will be.

Yes, they can be trampled on. They can be violated. And they can be denied. But they can never be taken away. Not by any law, policy, or action. And this is an important message to reaffirm today.

I also want to make two further points. The first is that we must focus on people.

We *do* need to talk about treaties, resolutions, mechanisms, and reports. But, in doing so, we cannot forget that people are at the centre of them all.

So, I am grateful for the opportunity, today, to put a spotlight on these people – who too often remain in the dark. A young man locked in a crowded cell, unsure whether he will ever be tried before a court of law. A journalist going to sleep, hoping that she will not hear a knock on her front door in the middle of the night. A family running for their lives from the only home they have known. A woman on a factory floor, working in inhuman conditions, for less than minimum wage. A girl taken out of school, and forced to marry a man three times her age. These people have the same rights as you and I. Unlike you and I, however, they cannot yet freely exercise them. And they need people – like you and I -to stand up taller, and speak louder, on their behalf.

Despite this harsh reality, I want to make a second point, which is that we *do* have reason to celebrate today.

And here I want to first look at the work of the General Assembly. As you know, it is the most representative body of the United Nations. Its membership comprises all 193 Member States and many observers. So, it is therefore home to different perspectives and positions. However, despite these differences, the General Assembly has succeeded in adopting roughly 80 human rights conventions and declarations since 1948.

But, as I have said, we have to look beyond the paper and documents, to the effect of our actions on people's lives.

And, there is cause for celebration here too. Because, the work of the United Nations to promote human rights around the world *has* had a direct impact on people.

I'm speaking here about an NGO, which has been given a voice through the Universal Periodic Review Process. A detainee, who has seen prison conditions improve since the visit of a UN rapporteur. An applicant in court, who can invoke an international convention or treaty to support her case. Or a government ministry, which has worked with the United Nations to build its own capacity to protect and promote human rights.

But our celebrations must be short-lived. Because there are still people in the dark, who have not yet felt any of these benefits.

And, that is why I welcome the initiative of the UN Office for Human Rights to launch a year-long campaign, which rallies us all to Stand Up for Human Rights. If we follow the news; if we talk to people from different backgrounds and countries; if we attend events in this building – then we know that a campaign like this is needed now more than ever.

Later, we will all watch a special performance. It will invoke the work and passion of Eleanor Roosevelt, as the Universal Declaration was adopted in 1948. Before we do so, I have some questions to ask:

Do you think Mrs. Roosevelt hoped that, in 70 years time, the world would look like it does today? Or do you think – as I do – that she would have hoped for more?

And, finally, what can each of us do to better realise her vision, and make human rights a reality for all?

We don't need to answer all these questions today. But we can use them to drive our work. And to inspire us to stand up taller – and speak up louder – for human rights.

Thank you.