STATEMENT BY

THE GOVERNMENT OF DENMARK

Delivered by

Minister for Foreign Affairs

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UNITED NATIONS HUMAN RIGHTS COUNCIL

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*[Check against delivery]*

Mr. President, High Commissioner, Excellencies

It is my great pleasure to address this Council. Denmark is honoured to take up a seat in the Human Rights Council **for the first time ever**. Our membership is a pledge of steadfast commitment to human rights. To multilateral cooperation. And to reform of the Council.

Human rights and liberal freedoms are the foundations for open, inclusive and successful societies. They are vital elements to achieve progress, sustainable development, prosperity, and equal opportunities for all. They are the basis for innovation and free trade. And essential to prevent conflict.

**Inequality** was mentioned this morning. Globally speaking inequality has actually been *declining* over the past three decades. More people are moving into the middle class, as developing countries are experiencing high growth rates.

So while the wealthiest 8 people in the world may have a combined fortune of 517 billion dollars, this is still only equivalent to 0,2 pct. of the world’s combined fortune.

The number of people living in absolute poverty has fallen from 1,9 billion in 1990 to 770 million in 2013. Some things are changing for the better.

Unfortunately, **human rights and liberal freedoms** are under pressure in many areas of the world. Basic human rights are violated every day. At this time, it is vital to stand up for the rights of people everywhere. The Council plays an important role in this regard.

The Council’s most important task is to deliver on its mandate. It is crucial that the work of the Council **makes a difference on the ground**.

**The Council has indeed demonstrated its ability to act in concrete situations**. To serve its function as a UN body that can lay the ground for holding countries and people accountable. Examples such as Syria and Myanmar only underline the importance of the Council’s ability to address horrific human rights violations and injustice.

However, we are also aware that the Council faces serious challenges in the way it functions today. The Council needs substantial reforms to ensure that it fully delivers on its mandate. This is our joint responsibility, if we are to make the Council credible and powerful.

First: Much too often, countries have been elected members of this Council in spite of dismal human rights records. But membership cannot be a way of protecting oneself from criticism. This undermines the credibility of the Council.

As a member, Denmark will work to ensure that all **members uphold the highest standards of human rights**, as we have all committed to do. And that reforms ensure that members are elected based on their merits and their political will to stand up for human rights. I therefore also strongly encourage more countries to stand for election.

Second: As a member, Denmark will work for a Council that treats all states in an **equal and fair manner**. It undermines the credibility of this Council and its members when it insists on singling out one country, Israel, a democracy, under its own agenda item. All countries should be treated on an equal footing. Therefore, we will not speak under Item 7, but address the situation in Israel/Palestine under other country-specific items where it belongs. We encourage others to do the same.

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Regrettably, we are constantly reminded of the need for this Council’s attention to serious violations of human rights.

In **Venezuela**, the most basic principles of rule of law and democracy has been severely undermined by the repressive Maduro-regime. Denmark has therefore recognized the president of the National Assembly as the legitimate interim president of Venezuela. We call for the urgent holding of free and democratic presidential elections in accordance with international standards and the Venezuelan constitutional order. We also call for an independent and impartial investigation of human rights violations in Venezuela – the people of Venezuela deserves justice. No more impunity for the Maduro regime.

In **Syria**, we still witness terrible abuses of human rights and violations of international humanitarian law. Denmark remains deeply concerned about the alarming number of disappearances in Syria for which the Syrian regime carries the overwhelming responsibility. We call on the international community to ensure that those responsible for human rights violations are held to account.

In **the Islamic Republic of Iran** we remain concerned about the continued use of capital punishment, while noting a reduction in the number of executions in 2018. We also note with concern the increased persecution of human rights defenders and civil society activists.

Also in the **Kingdom of Saudi Arabia**, we are extremely concerned about the increased persecution of civil society activists and note with serious concern the continued use of torture and the death penalty.

We remain concerned by the worsening human rights situation in **Bahrain** and we repeat our call for the release of the Danish-Bahraini citizen Mr. Abdulhadi Al-Khawaja.

The conflict in **Yemen** has developed into the world’s largest humanitarian catastrophe. We urge all parties to the conflict to ensure protection of civilians and unhindered access for humanitarian assistance. Implementation of the Stockholm agreement remains vital, and we express our unconditional support to the ongoing UN-led efforts to bring this deeply disturbing conflict to an end.

The human rights situation in **Russia** remains deeply concerning. The sentencing of the Danish Jehovah’s Witness Mr. Dennis Christensen to six years in prison is unjust and unfounded and creates a worrisome precedent. We call on Russia, and every other State, to guarantee fundamental freedoms for all, including freedom of religion or belief. Further, Russia must conduct thorough investigations of the multiple reports of persecution and torture of LGBTI persons **in Chechnya**.

I have just visited **Eastern Ukraine,** including the city of Mariupol, where I saw for myself the hardship caused by the ongoing Russian aggression. I remain deeply concerned by the human rights situation in the separatist-held regions of Ukraine **and in illegally annexed Crimea**. Human rights actors and monitors should be granted free access. Perpetrators must be held accountable.

Denmark also remains concerned about the human rights situation in **Turkey**, including freedom of expression, arrests of and charges against human rights activists, journalists, academics and members of parliament. Denmark calls on Turkey to protect the rule of law, judicial independence, due process and human rights.

It is, however, also important to look forward.Denmark envisions a Council engaged in the new frontiers for human rights. **New** **technologies** have immense potential, but also come with challenges. The **2030 Agenda,** with its sustainable development goals, is also an opportunity to further the promotion and protection of human rights as the foundation of sustainable development. With new frontiers comes a need for new partners. **Businesses** are important partners to ensure the protection of human rights.And **civil society** remains essential for informing policies and monitoring implementation on the ground.

Finally, a successful Council requires an **effective and independent Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights**. Denmark **strongly supports the crucial work of** High Commissioner, Michelle Bachelet, and her office.

Denmark remains committed to dialogue and cooperation and looks forward to three years as a member of the Human Rights Council.

Thank you.