**Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken**

**UN Human Rights Council**

**Pre-Recorded Statement**

**March 2, 2023**

Mr. Secretary-General, High Commissioner Turk, President Bálek, fellow members of the United Nations Human Rights Council: we are marking 75 years since the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

At its heart is a simple, yet revolutionary, idea: human rights are universal. Or, as the drafters of the Declaration put it, human rights belong to, “all members of the human family.” And these rights are indivisible, interdependent, and co-equal.

These principles were not shaped by any one country, region, or ideology. They were discussed,

debated, and meticulously drafted by experts from countries big and small, North and South,

centuries-old and newly independent. Each delegate brought to the collective enterprise ideas and perspectives that helped define the Declaration.

Charles Malik, the delegate from Lebanon, argued that human rights must be defined in terms of the individual—not the nation or any other group. Representing China, P.C. Chang suggested the entire framework should be built, in his words, “with a view to elevating the concept of man’s dignity.” And dignity is the first principle in the first line of the Declaration. Hansa Mehta of India—one of three women delegates, together with Pakistan’s Begum Ikramullah and America’s Eleanor Roosevelt—insisted that rights be framed as belonging to *all* people, not just men.

Indeed, the fact that the Declaration was forged and agreed upon by people representing nations with such diverse backgrounds, histories, and political systems is what gave it such unimpeachable legitimacy and moral force.

That’s still true today, even as some try to cast the Declaration’s definition of human rights as reflecting the view of one region or ideology, or argue that different countries can have different conceptions of human rights, or try to put the sovereignty of states ahead of the human rights of individuals.

It’s the responsibility of this Council—and every UN Member State—to uphold the Declaration’s universal vision, and defend the human rights of everyone, everywhere. That includes protecting the human rights of our most vulnerable populations, a central tenet of the Vienna Declaration that we adopted 30 years ago. That’s why the United States partnered with countries from around the world to renew the mandate for the UN’s Independent Expert on Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity; and why we made a voluntary contribution to support the vital work of the Permanent Forum on People of African Descent in countering anti-Black discrimination—the only country to do so.

Upholding the Declaration’s vision also means continuing to advance economic, social, and cultural rights. The United States is committed to enabling people around the world to enjoy these rights. We invest more than any other country in the capacity of fellow Member States to provide health care and food security for their populations. And last year, we joined 160 fellow Member States in supporting a resolution that affirms the right to a clean, healthy, and sustainable environment.

Fulfilling the Declaration’s universal promise also means advancing human rights *within* our countries—something we have sought to do in the United States, especially over the past two years. Since President Biden issued an open invitation in 2021 to all UN special procedures mandate holders, the United States has welcomed the Special Rapporteur on Minority Issues and the Independent Expert on Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity. And just a few weeks ago, the Special Rapporteur on the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms while Countering Terrorism made the first-ever visit by a UN mandate holder to the detention facility in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba.

We do this because we believe transparency and openness are not a threat to our sovereignty,

but a way to make our government better at advancing the rights, needs, and aspirations of the people we serve. We see our ability to accept critical feedback, and to strive, always, to address enduring injustices and inequities, as a sign of strength—not weakness.

Holding ourselves to the same standards as we do every other government is particularly important at a time when human rights around the world are under assault, perhaps nowhere more than in Russia’s brutal war on Ukraine.

This Council has played a crucial role in shining a spotlight on Moscow’s horrific and ongoing abuses, including through the creation of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Ukraine. The COI’s first report in October concluded that Russia has committed war crimes and violations of international humanitarian law. As long as Russia continues to wage its war,

the COI should continue to document such abuses, providing an impartial record of what’s occurring, and a foundation for national and international efforts to hold perpetrators accountable.

Governments that commit atrocities abroad are also likely to violate the rights of people at home, and that’s exactly what Russia is doing. The Russian government now holds more than 500 political prisoners. In January, it shuttered the Moscow Helsinki Group—one of the last human rights organizations still allowed to operate in the country. The government’s systematic muzzling of independent voices in Russian civil society makes the work of the Special Rapporteur on human rights in the country even more important.

The Iranian regime is also once again cracking down on citizens demanding their human rights and fundamental freedoms. Since the killing of Mahsa Amini in September brought Iranians of all ages out into the streets, the regime has killed at least 500 people, and imprisoned tens of thousands more, many of whom have been tortured, according to human rights groups.

In November, the Council came together to create an independent fact-finding mission to investigate Iran’s human rights violations; we must ensure the team can do its work.

We condemn the Taliban’s draconian repression of women and girls in Afghanistan,

including barring them from universities and secondary schools. The Taliban’s recent edict prohibiting Afghan women from working for NGOs has closed off yet another pathway that should be open to them. And in a country where 29 million people depend on humanitarian aid for survival, the Taliban’s decision will significantly reduce the amount of food, medicine,

and other life-saving assistance reaching vulnerable people, especially women and girls.

We remain gravely concerned about the ongoing genocide and crimes against humanity that China is committing against Muslim Uyghurs and other members of minority groups in Xinjiang.

The report issued last year by the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights affirmed serious abuses perpetrated by the PRC in Xinjiang, including the large-scale arbitrary deprivation of liberty of members of Uyghur and other predominantly Muslim communities,

and credible allegations of torture and sexual and gender-based violence.

Nearly a dozen years since launching its crackdown on Syrians demanding their human rights,

the Assad regime continues to commit widespread abuses, which is why we urge Council members to renew the mandate of the country’s Commission of Inquiry, even as we surge humanitarian assistance to help those in Syria and Turkey impacted by the devastating earthquake.

On this Council, we have a responsibility to act in a way that’s true to the spirit of the Universal Declaration on Human Rights, including treating every country equally. That’s why the United States continues to strongly oppose biased and disproportionate treatment of Israel,

reflected in the Commission of Inquiry with no end date, and standing Agenda Item 7.

In the 75 years since the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was adopted,

there has rarely been a time when delivering on its commitments has been more urgent,

or more consequential. To international peace and security. To development. To human dignity.

The vision the drafters set out 75 years ago is as clear today as it was then: *All* members of the human family are entitled to human rights. Let us continue to strive to make those words real—through the actions of the Human Rights Council, within our countries, and around the world.