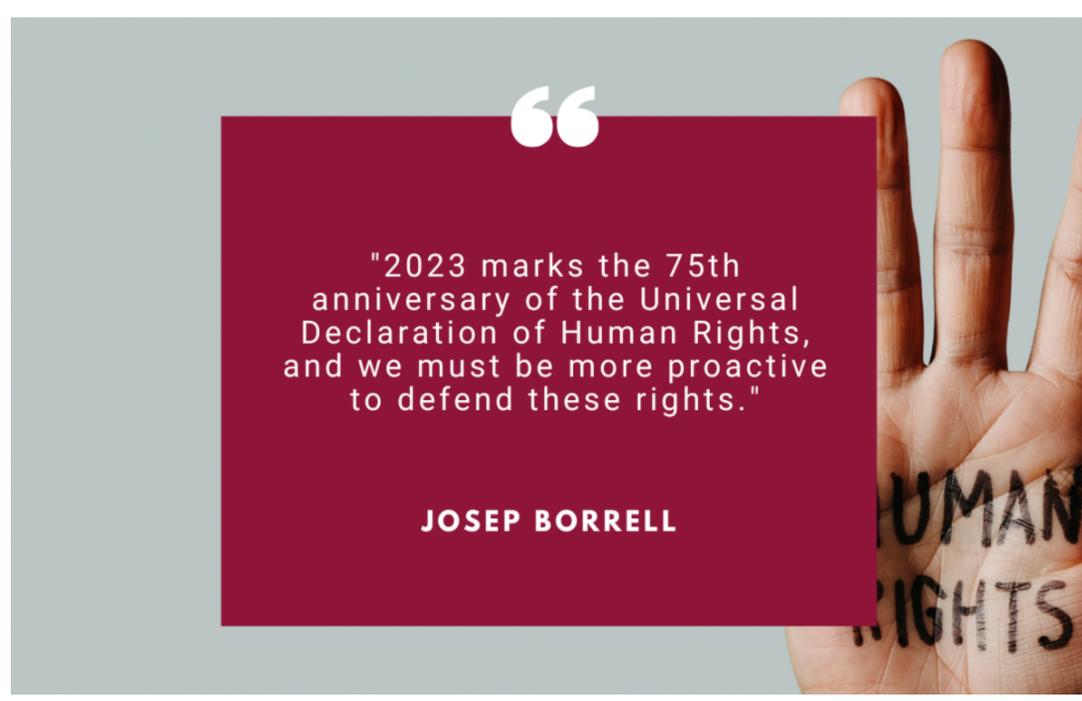


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Let's make 2023 a year of turning the tide on human rights

07.01.2023 Josep Borrell, High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy / Vice-President of the European Commission

HR/VP Blog – In 2023 the world will mark the 75th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. We need to be inspired by that landmark document and the global consensus it enshrined. Recognising that we face adverse trends and the global human rights situation is getting worse, we must be determined and creative in our defence of the universality of human rights.



At the start of 2023, we are facing a sobering situation. The harsh truth is that in 2022 the world became a worse place for human rights. We saw dramatic violations of human rights in multiple countries, conflicts and crises: in Ukraine, Iran, Ethiopia, Afghanistan, Myanmar, China and many other places.

With more geopolitical competition, revisionist powers also actively undermine the human rights acquis with new narratives. Such narratives are constructed using familiar language and terminology so that at first glance they may seem innocent, but we should be under no illusion that the aim is to change the agreed international human rights doctrine and to erode the rights of individuals.

The growing geopolitical divisions are particularly worrying, as they seek to give a misleading sense that the world at large no longer has any common ground. But in fact we do. We need to remember what unites us – more than 8 billion people and 193 members of the UN.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights at 75

In 1948, after the horrors of the Second World War, scholars and diplomats from around the world and very different legal and cultural backgrounds, came together and to produce a landmark document: the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, enumerating the rights that every human being has.

The simple and yet revolutionary idea of that document is that rights cannot be given; they already belong to every single person. But we knew then, and know even more so today, that rights can be taken away. That is why we must protect them.

Forty-five years later, in 1993, 171 states and 800 representatives of nongovernmental organisations (NGOs) adopted the Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action (VDPA) at the UN World Conference on Human Rights.

Then, as now, there were intense discussions over whether human rights are universal or culturally relative; whether economic, social, and cultural rights should prevail over civil and political ones; whether development should be considered a right; and whether or not to name states with a record of human rights violations.

In the end, the world agreed on the universality, interdependence and indivisibility of human rights. This means that there is no hierarchy of rights, with some taking precedence over others; or that there are cultural or geographic exceptions. All human beings wherever they live, have these rights and are entitled to have them protected.

In 2023, 75 years since the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the world is a different place. More plural, with more countries and peoples demanding their voices be heard. But also more unequal and with a rise in identity politics amplified by social media that are tearing our societies apart.

We need to remember why these two declarations came about in their time and how they can help us to deal with today's challenges. We need to remember that human rights and democracy are not values which define Europe; they are values which define humanity.

We also need to remember that defending and promoting human rights and democracy begin at home. We can only be credible towards the rest of the world if we are open about our own shortcomings and relentless in confronting those that erode human rights within our own societies.

The EU's human rights agenda for 2023

Human rights lie at the basis of the EU and of our relations with the rest of the world. As I said in my speech at the EU-NGO Human Rights Forum, they are a core priority for EU foreign policy; for what we say; for what we do and for how we spend our money.

So, we systematically condemn human rights violators and put sanctions on the worst offenders. Indeed, we have created a new global human rights sanctions regime, so we can go after violations wherever they occur. We are now setting up a new Global Observatory on the Fight Against Impunity (around €20 mil budget) to gather information and build a knowledge base about genocide, crimes against humanity and other serious human rights violations.

While we do a lot as EU, and sometimes more than we get credit for, it is also clear that we must do more and do it better. For instance, we need to stop getting caught in a web of arguments about the importance of some rights over others. And we certainly need to quash any rhetoric that inverts the obligations of states and the rights of individuals.

In 2023, I would like us to be more proactive, innovative and creative when it comes to human rights.

For instance, we need to stress that doing so is part of enhancing our security. We need to work harder on fighting impunity and ensuring accountability, for instance through our support to the International Criminal Court (ICC) and our work on Russia's war crimes in Ukraine.

Other concrete areas include the need to ensure that the digital transformation and surveillance technologies are not used to curtail human rights, to continue to work with those countries most affected by climate change and environmental degradation to address the human rights consequences, and to work with partners on the right to development and on countering racial discrimination.

And we also need to rebuild trust: in institutions, among governments and among generations. The EU will organise a Human Rights Conference in 2023 to mark the 75th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights – and we will make sure to involve not just government representatives, but also young people, civil society, the private sector and others.

Reconfirm that human rights are international law

Many of the trends we face on human rights are strong and, sadly, run counter to what we want. This only makes it more necessary that we work harder, with our international partners, to make 2023 a year of countering the trend.

We must reconfirm that human rights are the law, international law, not privileges. Nor are they restricted to Europe and other so-called Western countries. No, to qualify for human rights protection, you only need to be human: a global citizen with rights.

We have to try and ensure that by the time we get to the 100th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in December, people will say that after years of backsliding, 2023 was a turning point for the cause of human rights.

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