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Human Rights Council: what to expect from the 50th session's final week

By Liv Martin

It's been an eventful, agenda-packed 50th session for the United Nations Human Rights Council. With various conflicts, pressing human rights atrocities, new challenges posed by the Covid-19 pandemic and the climate crisis all at top of mind, the Council had much to digest and discuss. This session marked UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet's last, as she announced her decision to not seek reelection. Ahead of the session's final week, here are the key themes corresponding to draft resolutions that are awaiting decisions.

Women and children

Violence against women and girls was a major focus of the 50th session. A draft resolution was submitted to renew the mandate of the special rapporteur on violence against women, its causes and consequences. Other draft resolutions were filed for the elimination of female genital mutilation, the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women and girls, and participation of women in the administration of justice.

"We are learning that gender-based violence against women and girls continues to exist at epidemic levels, and it would not be an understatement to say that we have only uncovered the tip of the iceberg," said Reem Alsalem, special rapporteur on violence against women, its causes and consequences, during the Council's interactive dialogue with her on 20 June.

Throughout the session, there was also an interactive dialogue with the special rapporteur on trafficking in persons, especially women and children, and a panel discussion on menstrual hygiene management, human rights and gender equality. The Council dedicated a full day to its annual discussion on the human rights of women, plus an annual thematic panel, which focused this year on the inclusion of women in decision-making and the elimination of violence.

On Friday last week, the Council held an urgent debate, requested by the European Union and France, on the human rights of women and girls in Afghanistan. Speaking at the debate, Bachelet deplored that the Taliban had not honoured their human rights obligations, despite assurances made to her when she visited in March. "We are witnessing the progressive exclusion of women and girls from the public sphere," the rights chief said. She called on them to set a firm date to reopen schools for girls and remove restrictions on women's movement and attire. The UN body will decide on a draft resolution this week.

Climate change and migration

The increasingly relevant topic of how the climate crisis is coinciding with human rights was also mentioned frequently this session. One broad draft resolution was submitted on the topic; another draft resolution to renew the mandate of the special rapporteur on the human rights of internally displaced persons is also deeply tied to global climate change and migration issues.

"We are facing a growing tide of people displaced by the impacts of climate change. This is an intolerable human rights tragedy," said Ian Fry, special rapporteur on the human rights of internally displaced persons, in his statement to a Council panel on his mandate's subject. "Tragically, there are people, due their particular circumstances, who cannot escape these disasters."

Many discussions on climate change took place during the 50th session as well. For example, there were interactive dialogues with both the Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of human rights in the context of climate change and the Special Rapporteur on the human rights of migrants. Additionally, the Council held a panel discussion on the adverse impact of climate change on the full and effective enjoyment of human rights by people in vulnerable situations.

Covid-19 pandemic

The Covid-19 pandemic, which has fundamentally changed the world, was a major discussion point. A group of eight developing nations — Brazil, China, Egypt, India, Indonesia, Senegal, South Africa and Thailand — filed a draft resolution on access to medicines, vaccines, and other health products in the context of the right of everyone to the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health. The Council also dedicated a panel discussion to good governance in the promotion and protection of human rights during and after the Covid-19 pandemic.

LGBTQ+ rights, discrimination

LGBTQ+ issues have been pushed increasingly into the Council's agenda. "Social norms, society and culture, LGBTI rights and women's rights have become more of the focus of the Council in recent years," said Marc Limon, executive director of the Universal Rights Group. "These are typical liberal versus conservative flashpoints."

If a resolution is passed, the independent expert on protection against violence and discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity's mandate will be renewed. On 16 June, the Council had an interactive dialogue with the independent expert, in which he detailed his report on the status of LGBTQ+ issues in Tunisia.

Victor Madrigal-Borloz, independent expert on protection against violence and discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity, presents a report during 50th session of Human Rights Council. (Credit: UN Photo/Jean Marc Ferré)

"Despite important advances and the development of good practices, people continue to be victims of violence as well as multiple and intersectional forms of discrimination based on their sexual orientation and gender identity," said Uruguay on behalf of the sexual orientation and gender identity (SOGI) group during the 16 June meeting. "This reality explains why this mandate continues to be indispensable, as it is the only one in the entire United Nations system that addresses this issue."

Furthermore, an interactive dialogue is planned for 5 July with the special rapporteur on contemporary forms of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance.

Conflict zones and country-specific human rights concerns

The Council focused attention on specific human rights situations across the globe. Draft resolutions were submitted regarding Syria, Sudan, Belarus, Eritrea, Libya, and Rohingya Muslims and other minorities in Myanmar. In addition, Liechtenstein, Costa Rica, Croatia and Sierra Leone filed a draft resolution on the importance of casualty recording for the promotion and protection of human rights. Time was also dedicated to human rights concerns in Ukraine, Crimea, Palestine, Afghanistan, Nicaragua, Burundi and Venezuela.

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