

**Open-ended Working Group on Ageing
Eleventh session, 29 March 2021**

Statement by Ms. Ilze Brands Kehris, Assistant Secretary-General for Human Rights

Excellencies,
Distinguished delegates,
Friends and colleagues,

It is an honour to address this Working Group on behalf of the Secretary-General.

Last year, the Secretary-General launched his Call to Action for Human Rights to reaffirm the centrality of human rights to our mission.

Echoing the words of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Call to Action reaffirms fundamental freedoms as the “highest aspiration for the common people”.

Based on this premise, it recognizes that human rights are essential for sustainable development and just and peaceful societies.

Since the launch, the world has confronted the biggest international crisis in generations. At the core, it is a human rights crisis.

The devastation and suffering brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic has touched everyone in our societies, but older people have suffered the most.

Over the year of the pandemic, older people across the world have faced great fear and suffering. The overwhelming majority of deaths from the pandemic have been older people. We remain alarmed by reports of the hardships and neglect experienced by older people in care homes and institutions. In extreme cases, they were left to die, unattended, from COVID-19, or from malnutrition or dehydration, many in some of the world’s wealthiest countries.

The pandemic has exposed long-standing, systemic inequalities. This includes patterns of discrimination that are deeply rooted in ageism – reflected in inadequate health services for older persons, gaps in social protection, and intersecting discrimination based on age, gender, disability and other grounds.

In building forward together, we now have, as the Secretary-General has emphasized, a unique and historic opportunity to forge a world built upon a foundation of inalienable rights, where every person’s dignity is respected throughout the life cycle.

This is the very purpose of this Working Group – to strengthen the protection of the human rights of older persons. A purpose and mission that is more relevant than ever.

Our world is rapidly ageing. People are living longer lives, and both the share and the number of older persons in the total population are growing.

Japan is an example of this global trend. Three-quarters of a century ago, there were only about 100 people aged 100 years or above in Japan. The number of centenarians continued to rise over the past 50 years. Today, there are more than 80,000 centenarians in the country.

At a global level, between 2020 and 2050, the number of older persons is projected to more than double. Thirty years from now, 1 in 6 people in the world will be an older person.

This presents not only challenges, but also opportunities. Older persons represent an incredibly diverse group and they are key actors of development and play crucial roles – not only in their families, but in our communities, economies, and political systems.

In the face of the pandemic, for instance, we have seen older retired doctors and nurses leaping to the call for help during the peak of the crisis.

A coherent, comprehensive and integrated international legal framework on the rights of older persons that responds to the reality of our changing world and specific human rights challenges and protection gaps that older people face would allow us to reap the full benefits of longevity for sustainable development in all its dimensions.

Excellencies,

Last year, to mark our 75th anniversary, the UN conducted a global survey asking people around the world to identify a top priority for the United Nations going forward.

A vast number replied with two words: human rights.

They identified tackling inequality and making human rights real as a central priority for the United Nations. The UN75 dialogue on inequalities made a specific recommendation to “promote a creation of an UN Convention to protect the rights of older persons”. This is a powerful message, coming directly from people we serve.

In responding to the COVID-19 crisis, we have strengthened our collective efforts to advocate for the human rights of older persons.

Guided by the Secretary-General’s Policy Brief on the impact of COVID-19 on older people, UN agencies have joined up efforts under the Inter-Agency Working Group on Ageing to support the implementation of the UN Decade of Healthy Ageing, launch the UN Global Report on Ageism and integrating older persons in the UN socioeconomic response framework for COVID-19 response and recovery.

Excellencies,

The Secretary-General’s Call to Action extends beyond the UN family.

It is also a call to all Member States, to parliamentarians, to the business community, to civil society, to National Human Rights Institutions (NHRIs) and to people everywhere.

In his Policy Brief, the Secretary-General has leaned into this conversation for the first time, calling upon this Working Group to accelerate efforts to develop proposals for an international legal instrument to promote and protect the rights and dignity of older persons.

This requires full commitment by all Member States and all stakeholders to collectively move forward.

Genuine, effective and meaningful participation – particularly by civil society, NHRIs and older persons themselves – in the discussion of this Working Group is an essential prerequisite.

We shoulder a collective responsibility. Transformative change will take the full commitment and support of us all.

What we need is a renewed, concerted, global determination to ensure the protection of human rights of older persons.

This Working Group can demonstrate that commitment through a concrete roadmap towards the fulfilment of its mandate to “present to the General Assembly, at the earliest possible date, a proposal containing, inter alia, the main elements that should be included in an international legal instrument to promote and protect the rights and dignity of older persons”.

We must all join forces to uphold the rights and dignity of older persons everywhere.

I wish you all success in your discussions and deliberations in the days ahead.

Thank you.