

**Statement by Mr Frank Belfrage, State Secretary for Foreign Affairs of Sweden,
at the High-Level Segment of the Human Rights Council, 1 March 2011**

Mr President,

Allow me, first of all, to align myself with the statement made yesterday by Catherine Ashton, the European Union's High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy.

In the first months of 2011, we have witnessed dramatic changes in countries in North Africa and the Middle East. Sweden supports the peoples of these countries in their legitimate hopes and aspirations for human rights, democratic change, social justice and economic development. The international community must accompany these countries to ensure a prompt and peaceful transition to democracy.

The violent repression of demonstrators and civilian deaths are unacceptable and has, rightly so, been condemned by the international community. It is both important and appropriate that the Human Rights Council, in order to fulfil its mandate, addresses serious human rights violations wherever they occur. We therefore welcome the outcome of the Special Session on Libya last Friday, in the light of the unacceptable violence and use of force against civilians condemned by the Security Council, the European Union and the League of Arab States. We also strongly support the Security Council's call upon the Government of

Libya to meet its responsibility to protect its population. It is absolutely rights that those accountable for the grave human rights violations committed in Libya will now be investigated by the International Criminal Court.

Mr. President,

Five years ago, the General Assembly - under the Swedish Presidency - was finalizing the resolution that created this Council.

That process gave birth to what is a central organ of the UN system, with the responsibility and authority to deal seriously with gross and systematic human rights violations, wherever they occur. An organ that could respond promptly to human rights emergencies.

And we have a mechanism, the Universal Periodic Review, which enables us to examine the human rights record of every Member State. Sweden was itself subject to a Universal Periodic Review last year, and we found the experience was very useful in that it helped focus our efforts to strengthen human rights.

Much can surely be done to improve how the Human Rights Council works, how to make the Council more active when human rights violations occur, be they urgent or chronic. We also believe there are paths and ideas to explore to ensure that countries with the greatest commitment to human rights standards are the ones elected to the Council.

Any nation that takes human rights seriously, and any State that - like us - has declared that these rights form a cornerstone of its national and foreign policy, must also recognise the need for a strong and vital Human Rights Council as a central body of the United Nations system, and engage actively to ensure its legitimacy.

Mr President,

For Sweden, the issue of human rights has various complementary aspects, involving important political and legal issues as well as fundamental moral positions and values.

Each of these aspects builds on the human rights embodied in the Universal Declaration.

The fundamental premise of this declaration is that all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. It affirms the aspirations of all people to enjoy freedom of speech and belief, as well as freedom from fear and want.

When Sweden aspires to membership of the Human Rights Council, we do so as firm advocates of the universality of human rights.

All rights are universal, indivisible, interdependent and interrelated. For us, the full and equal enjoyment of all human rights for all is fundamental.

We are strong defenders of civil and political rights, and will accept no infringement of these fundamental rights.

We are equally strong advocates of everyone's right to equal opportunities, and will not weaken in our efforts to support the sustainable development of all nations.

The right to life is at the core of all human rights. We are appalled by the extent of extrajudicial killings, in all parts of the world, and call upon every State to intensify their efforts to bring these terrible acts to a halt. In my Government's view, it is also inconceivable to claim to respect the right to life while at the same time sentencing people to death and then executing them.

The fact that fewer States are now using the death penalty is encouraging. However, there are still many countries in which executions take place. The highest number of executions is believed to be carried out in China. We regret that the Chinese authorities are not publishing information in this regard.

Torture and other cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment or punishment have no place in a civilized society. Sweden welcomes the efforts of the Special Rapporteur to ban torture. The Committee against Torture and the Subcommittee on the Prevention of Torture are also key instruments in holding nations accountable to their commitments in this field.

Mr President,

Sweden is deeply concerned by the worsening human rights situation in Iran. The use of the death penalty and the alarming rate of executions so far this year is profoundly disturbing. The most horrendous methods of killing human beings are still being used. Taking a person's life by stoning them to death is nothing less than barbaric. Sweden, together with other countries, proposes the establishment of a country mandate to address the human rights situation in Iran.

Mr. President,

Respect for human rights is fundamental in itself. But it is also indispensable for democracy, for the rule of law, for development, and for peace and security.

The past few decades have seen people in many former dictatorships take their destiny into their own hands, opening up their societies to democratic governance and to respect for human rights. Being assertive, claiming their rights. At the same time, people in authoritarian states across the world, such as the DPRK, Burma/Myanmar, Belarus, Cuba, Zimbabwe and many others, continue to be denied their democratic rights.

Respecting human rights and democratic values is the only way forward for nations seeking harmonious and sustainable development that meets the needs of all their citizens.

It has long been proven an illusion that a people's longing for social and economic justice can be suppressed by the use of force and violence. As we have seen in recent weeks, the time has also passed when a people's quest for justice and welfare can be met by curtailing their freedom of expression and their freedom of assembly. Freedom of the Internet is one of the best means to ensure that the world is made aware of ongoing human rights violations previously hidden and forgotten. In this age of instant communications, it is futile to try to prevent the dissemination of views and contacts by blocking the Internet and mobile phone services.

The principles of freedom of opinion and expression must also apply to the Internet and other new media. Sweden strongly condemns governments that block access to the Internet. Extensive blocking of the Internet is a violation of the freedom of expression and the freedom of information.

My Government actively supports the work of the Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Opinion and Expression, Mr Frank La Rue. We look forward to his report on Human Rights and the Internet, due in June. And we will explore, with others, the possibility of some kind of action in this Council to follow up on this report.

Mr President,

Serious discrimination against individuals, in one form or another, is still a concern in all countries. It is a problem that each and every

government has a responsibility to address – whether it is about race or ethnic origin, sexual orientation or political opinion, religion or language, gender or age. Regardless of the circumstances, everyone is entitled to the same rights.

In this discussion, freedom of religion is a particularly crucial concept. Let me state clearly that all forms of violence or discrimination against persons based on their religion or belief are unacceptable. States have a duty to protect everyone from intolerance, harassment and violence, whether he or she is Muslim or Christian, Hindu or Buddhist, or holds any other belief, or none at all.

Sweden also takes a very serious view on other forms of discrimination where persons are singled out and mistreated because of their gender or sexual orientation. Whether based on prejudice, cultural practice or traditional values, no such discrimination should be allowed. It is every government's responsibility to protect the human rights of all persons, including LGBT persons.

My country is a proud co-sponsor of the cross-regional statement that will be held during this session on ending violence and related human rights violations based on sexual orientation and gender identity. We encourage other States to join us in supporting this important statement.

Often, the most vulnerable and defenceless among us are the ones we ignore and hurt most. Children suffer from a host of discriminatory practices, which often prevent them from realising their potential. Many

boys and girls still lack access to health, education and adequate protection from abuse. Violence against children is intolerable, and Sweden will continue its efforts to make the world safe for children.

Mr President,

Working towards the realisation and full enjoyment of civil and political rights, as well as social and economic and cultural rights, is a key element in Sweden's foreign policy. In this regard, we advocate the fullest adherence to the International Covenants on these rights.

In addition, in engaging all in the realisation of human rights, and in a rights-based approach to development, it is of paramount importance to achieve the Millennium Development Goals. As we see it, the MDGs are strongly linked to the fulfilment of human rights. And when these goals are met - hopefully by 2015 - it will also mark considerable progress in the work for equal rights for all.

One of Sweden's three main priorities in development cooperation is to support and promote human rights and democracy. In these efforts, we encourage our partners to incorporate the recommendations of the Treaty Bodies, the Special Procedures and the UPR into their national development action plans.

Mr President,

I have mentioned several of our key priorities in our human rights work, and we trust that this Council can make a real difference in these areas.

We will continue our strong support for the independence of the High Commissioner and her office. The Treaty Bodies play a central role in the human rights system by monitoring States' performance, issuing recommendations and helping us clarify our obligations.

The same applies to the Special Rapporteurs and the Independent Experts. This is a group of dedicated and often courageous men and women who provide the Council with invaluable information and assessments on critical situations. They play a vital role in the protection and promotion of human rights, and accordingly deserve the respect and cooperation of all, not least the Member States of the Council.

At times, the special procedures can be complemented by ad hoc arrangements for specific purposes. One example is the Goldstone Report on the Gaza war two years ago, which we found to be a serious study of violations on both sides.

My country is committed to working with the Council, and in this Council, in a manner that is effective and leads to results on the ground. The Council matters if we make it matter.

Further, as has been the tradition in Swedish democracy for many years, we will strive to achieve this in a manner that is open and transparent.

And, that from time to time, has led us to speak out, here in Geneva and in New York, on specific situations in specific countries. I expect that we will continue to do so in the future.

At the same time, we do of course also welcome, and invite, comments on our own human rights record. We may not always agree with what is said. But we always accept any nation's right to scrutinise our own human rights situation, just as we will look carefully and constructively at that of others.

We also believe that this entire Council will benefit from an even more open debate on progress as well as shortcomings, on how we all, as States, shoulder the responsibility placed on us in the field of human rights.

Mr President,

It is the task of each Government to make sure that the human rights of all its citizens are fully respected. This task cannot be delegated to anyone else.

But it is the responsibility of the Human Rights Council to help promote such respect, to call attention to situations where this has failed, and to work for the implementation of all human rights - to make rights real.

My Government stands ready to make a constructive contribution to all these efforts of the Council. And we will endeavour to work for the

widest possible cooperation here and between this Council, the Member States, and other actors.

Mr President,

My country recently announced its candidacy to the Human Rights Council for the three-year period starting in June 2012.

We ask to be considered for membership of this crucial body because of the importance we attach to the Council in its work to promote and protect human rights worldwide.

We are also a candidate because we hope that Sweden, in partnership with others, can contribute to the work of the Council in a constructive and progressive manner.

Thank you.