



Human Rights Council

Information Service

United Nations Office in Geneva

A Historic Year for Human Rights in the United Nations

The new Human Rights Council, historic in its own right, is but one of several significant recent developments in the Organization's human rights programme.

In fact, the 2005 World Summit made human rights a central theme of its work, issuing an outcome document with more than 50 references to human rights, and reaffirming that the protection of human rights is one of the three pillars of the United Nations (alongside peace and security, and economic and social development), and that it is essential to the other two.

Many of the human rights provisions are concrete (such as the doubling of the human rights budget). Some are historic (including agreement on "the responsibility to protect" and, of course the mandating of a new Human Rights Council). Here are some highlights:

- ***A Breakthrough on the Responsibility to Protect:*** The first recording of a broad inter-governmental (global) consensus on "the responsibility to protect," acknowledging that sovereignty in the 21st century entails the responsibility to protect human rights, including an agreement that, where national authorities manifestly fail to protect their populations from genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity, the international community, acting through the United Nations, is responsible and empowered to act to ensure human rights protection.
- ***A Strengthened Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights:*** The Summit embraced measures to ensure that the actual implementation of human rights advances on the ground is pursued by the United Nations with the seriousness intended by the Charter. It called for the (unprecedented) doubling of the budget of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, explicitly acknowledged the ambitious Plan of Action of the High Commissioner (a key plank of the reform agenda annexed to "In Larger Freedom") and supporting a closer relationship between the High Commissioner for Human Rights and the Security Council.
- ***Advancing the Place of Human Rights in the UN System:*** The Summit issued a high-level intergovernmental mandate for mainstreaming human rights throughout the United Nations system, committed the UN to improving the effectiveness of the human rights treaty bodies, and called for more support to human rights education.

- ***Defending the Rights of Vulnerable, Persecuted, Deprived and Exploited Groups:*** The international community committed itself to step up efforts to combat poverty, and issued the first global reaffirmation of the right to development since 1993. It called on States to ensure that any measures taken to combat terrorism comply with their obligations under international human rights law. It promised a concerted international response to the scourge of human trafficking. It called for renewed efforts to eliminate gender based violence and pervasive gender discrimination in education, the ownership and inheritance of property, housing, access to reproductive health, labour rights, access to land, and access to government. And it called for renewed action to protect the human rights of migrants, children, indigenous peoples, persons with disabilities, minorities, internally displaced persons and refugees.