Foreword by the High Commissioner

The achievements of my Office in 2016 were especially notable in light of an embattled context for human rights work. In every region, human rights actors faced challenges to law and principle. Respect for the three great bodies of international law – international humanitarian law; international human rights law and international refugee law – was eroded. Not coincidentally, conflicts remained intractable, driving out millions of people to seek the basic conditions for life elsewhere. Religious hatred, xenophobia, homophobia and outright racism returned to the front stage. Judicial institutions, which act as checks on executive power, were undermined in several countries. Inequalities deepened divisions – wasting talent, undermining social cohesion and structuring economies to only benefit the few. Governments sharply restricted the ability of people to exercise their civil and political rights, which are essential in themselves and crucial to promoting and protecting economic, social and cultural rights, including the right to development.

This landscape calls for courage, clarity of conviction, compassion and an unyielding focus on our service to victims, human rights defenders, people vulnerable to abuses and humanity as a whole. Faced with today’s intensifying challenges to peaceful coexistence and sustainable development, my Office sees clearly how essential the work of upholding our mandate really is.

Discrimination, poverty, terrorism and conflict build on each other. Undoing this manufacture of suffering – and replacing it with inclusive development, justice and peace – is our shared responsibility. In the course of this past year, we have worked to assist civil society in countries across the world to exercise strong and confident voices. We have helped States and other key actors to increase their capacity to protect and fulfil the rights of their people. We have supported the international human rights mechanisms which, along with my Office, issue expert
and practical guidance in support of universal freedoms. The in-depth monitoring and private and public advocacy that we undertook created opportunities for prevention – shedding light on patterns of violations and showing how these can be halted, repaired and rights restored.

Improving the ability of individuals – the world over – to enjoy their rights, wherever they are, is the core purpose of all that we do. From strengthening human rights mechanisms to working with local non-governmental organizations; with national authorities, Parliaments and human rights commissions; and with regional institutions – our ultimate aim is to assist all women, men, young people and children to live in dignity.

The pages that follow set out concrete examples of this work to uphold the universality and indivisibility of rights across every region and in diverse sectors. Our work, now well underway, to set up the new international, impartial and independent mechanism on international crimes in Syria, which the General Assembly called for in an unprecedented resolution in December 2016. Our Stand Up For Human Rights campaign that seeks to galvanize people to take a personal stand in their everyday lives for the human rights of those around them. Our intensified work to protect the rights of migrants, in the context of increasing xenophobia, militarization of borders and escalating reliance on detention and deportation. Our efforts to mainstream human-rights based approaches throughout the work of all UN entities, including by promoting implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in alignment with international human rights standards at global and country level. These are but some of the ways in which we have sought to ensure that human rights are understood to be assets to the cooperative and collaborative efforts of the international community to advance peace, prosperity and justice for all.

Our current planning cycle will end in 2017 and we expect that the majority of the expected accomplishments and targets set out in the Office Management Plan will be achieved in the course of the coming 12 months. Although deferral by the General Assembly of our Change Initiative plans delays our efforts for a more balanced global presence, we remain fully committed to strengthened regional and country presences to enable more effective delivery on our mandate – to protect and promote all human rights for all.

I take this opportunity to thank all of our partners, donors and all the local, national, regional and global actors who have stood up for the work of our Office in 2016. Your support inspires us to continue to address challenges. I am encouraged by your backing for our work to tackle the root causes of conflict by reacting earlier and more effectively in addressing human rights concerns. Only by upholding the human rights of all can we build peace within and between nations and this essential task of prevention will always be at the core of all that we do. I trust that the work laid out in these pages will inspire you to deepen your support as we continue to strive for a more peaceful, more prosperous and more just future.

Zeid Ra’ad Al Hussein
High Commissioner for Human Rights
May 2017