

[10 years of the UN Human Rights Council: Remarks by Salil Shetty](#)

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Salil Shetty, Secretary General of Amnesty International, reflects on the first ten years of the Human Rights Council. He discusses the achievements and the challenges - highlighting that 'the very systems put in place to protect human rights are under unprecedented strain' and identifies six imperatives for the Council to be fit for purpose over the next decade.



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*Remarks by **Salil Shetty**, Secretary General of Amnesty International, on a high-level panel during the high-level segment of the 31st session of the Human Rights Council*

Ten years is an important milestone. And yet, the challenges around us are plain to see. The very systems put in place to protect human rights are under unprecedented strain, with catastrophic consequences for those who suffer at the hands of governments and armed groups. While we celebrate ten years of the Council, its success must be judged above all by the impact it has on real lives, those of ordinary people around the world.

Let me start by saying Amnesty International has been committed to the Human Rights Council from its inception. We engaged fully with the processes that led to its creation, and to the negotiations to make it functional. We made leading contributions to the creation of the UPR and the enhancement of Special Procedures. We have invested heavily both in the work of the Council, and in the Council as an institution. I speak today with the assurance of Amnesty International's ongoing commitment to building a Council fit for purpose.

And the Council has chalked up some important successes. The UPR has functioned well as a review mechanism. The Special Procedures have grown in strength and influence. New mandates have been created to address important issues such as the right to privacy and the elimination of discrimination against women. Important new standards have been adopted and are starting to be used, such as the "Guiding Principles on business and human rights". Informal normative development has fleshed out existing rights, such as the rights to water and sanitation. Emergencies have been addressed in special sessions. Council initiatives have contributed to accountability efforts in countries ranging from Côte d'Ivoire to Sri Lanka to the DPRK. Recently in connection with Burundi, the Council has embarked on tentative steps to prevent gross and systematic violations. As a fairly high-profile forum it ensures that human rights remain visible among UN activities. Webcasting has taken the Council out into the world.

Yet too many serious human rights violations go unaddressed. Many acute and chronic human rights situations receive little or inadequate attention. Many avoidable emergencies are not avoided. Accountability for violations is severely limited. Too many decisions and recommendations go unimplemented.

General Assembly resolution 60/251, which established the Council, remains an important checklist to map aspirations for its future development. A successful Council would contribute substantively to preventing serious human rights violations; it would respond promptly; it would promote accountability; it would be consistent; it would promote good human rights practice input throughout the UN system; and it would promote full implementation of human rights obligations everywhere. This is a tall order, but aiming any lower would be an abdication of responsibilities under the UN Charter.

The Council is in danger of becoming a victim of itself. Its current programme of work is a symptom of a malaise that stalks the Council. More statements, more reports, more experts, more panels and more of everything is not a recipe for success. The overwhelming intensity disenfranchises smaller delegations and civil society organisations. Innumerable hours of monologues do not permit the constructive dialogue needed to prevent violations or find solutions. The urgent and the essential risks being drowned by the fashionable and the routine.

The Council is full of smart diplomats, but cries out for smarter diplomacy. It needs to be able to set institutional priorities. It must find ways to identify the highest priority human rights issues and address them effectively and durably.

And against the reality that the Council is a political body, we must aspire to less power and alliance politics and to a different politics: a politics aimed at finding durable human rights solutions to human rights challenges.

I would like to address briefly six simple but important imperatives for the Council, in order that it can be fit for its essential purpose over the next decade.

The first concerns the way the Council is constituted. While every state can improve its human rights record, some members of the Council plainly fail to uphold the highest standards we are entitled to expect. The pressure of contested elections is essential. Candidates must make their case through election pledges and defend their candidacy in hustings. The General Assembly must use its power to suspend the membership rights of any Council member that commits gross and systematic violations of human rights.

Second, the next ten years must see a far greater projection of the Council's work beyond the Geneva bubble. Eleanor Roosevelt observed, human rights begin "in small places, close to home". The UPR has been somewhat successful in drawing attention to human rights issues across governments, between levels of government and within society. But the Council needs to aspire to go much further, to project counter narratives in the face of leaders prepared to walk away from human rights for short-term gains.

Third, the Council's work must become better integrated into the work of the UN system. This starts with human rights standards becoming much more central to the planning and delivery of all UN operations. The Human Rights Council and the Security Council need to develop a closer symbiotic relationship, and the Council must also develop working relationships with regional human rights bodies.

Fourth, the contributions of civil society are integral to the Council's effectiveness. It must be safe and welcoming to civil society; there must be consequences for intimidation or reprisals. The status quo is not enough. There must be creative new ways to enhance civil society contributions, particularly in regions where civil society engagement with the UN is underdeveloped.

Fifth, the Council needs to perform considerably better in preventing grave violations and in responding forcefully to gross and systematic violations. This demands both better early warning procedures, and greater responsiveness. The Special Procedures, the High Commissioner for Human Rights and the Secretary-General, informed by his Human Rights Up Front initiative, should contribute as trigger mechanisms. Above all, early warning must lead to early action by the Human Rights Council and by the Security Council and other parts of the UN, working together.

Sixth and last, the Council must be judged ultimately by implementation and impact. The next ten years must see a far greater emphasis on the implementation of the Council's decisions, of election pledges, of UPR commitments, of the recommendations of the Special Procedures.

The Human Rights Council is only as strong as its Member States allow it to be. We have to learn from history that the only way to achieve lasting peace and development is through respecting human rights. Not doing so will have a heavy price, as we have seen in Syria. On behalf of its 7 million members, activists and supporters, Amnesty International is calling on Member States for a Council that is fit for purpose.