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page 1 to 4

**Federal President Joachim Gauck
at the reception for the UN Human Rights Council
Schloss Bellevue
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Most of you know that I was in Geneva two years ago and had an opportunity to address the Human Rights Council. You were kind enough to invite me. Today, it gives me great pleasure to be your host. I am glad that you accepted my invitation and would like to bid you a very warm welcome to Schloss Bellevue, the Federal President's official residence. By inviting you here today, I want to show how important your work is to me.

The Federal President is a constitutional body but, of course, he is also an individual. Seeing all of you in front of me reminds me of my own personal experience. For I know what it means to live in a state which denies its citizens their fundamental rights and freedoms.

You have come to Berlin today to discuss how the work of the Human Rights Council can be improved and the protection of human rights strengthened within the UN system. I would like to thank you, Ambassador Rücker, for taking this initiative. We need a Human Rights Council which works efficiently and effectively – in close dialogue with all those who are fighting human rights violations.

Since my visit to Geneva, the fight for human rights in which you and many committed people are engaged has become even more difficult. Every day, we hear reports of human rights violations – every one of which gives cause for despair. On top of the old conflicts, we see that new crises are mounting. Injustice is being done in Central Africa, the Middle East, in Asian and Latin American countries, as well as in the European Union's immediate neighbourhood – Ukraine. Those who commit acts of violence destroy human lives, and they undermine our belief in humanity.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights begins by saying that "recognition of inherent dignity and of equal and inalienable rights (...) is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world". Failure to live up to this avowal is not a new phenomenon. However, the acts of

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violence which terrorist groups such as Boko Haram or the so-called "Islamic State" commit – by the way, sometimes with the involvement of young people from free and peaceful societies – are particularly irreconcilable with the international community's pledge to further "the promotion of universal respect for and observance of human rights and fundamental freedoms".

And there's another aspect of these crises which shocks me and many others: the fate of the many refugees. It goes against any idea of human dignity when people fleeing violence and persecution, indeed seeking a life in dignity, are robbed once more of their fundamental rights or even lose their lives.

The challenges for the Human Rights Council and all those working for the protection of fundamental rights are therefore huge: your work is more important than ever! However, this also means that your body has to fulfil its mandate as the guardian and champion of human rights effectively. Only then will the Human Rights Council retain its credibility – and only then will people have faith in its members. A champion of human rights can only be convincing on the international stage by setting a good example at home. As was stated in the resolution with which the Human Rights Council was founded in 2006, its members must "uphold the highest standards in the promotion and protection of human rights". This is a significant pledge which brings with it significant responsibility.

The Federal Republic of Germany lives up to this responsibility, which is demonstrated, among other things, by the fact that we have taken over the Presidency of the Human Rights Council this year. Over the past decades, Germany itself had to travel along an arduous road to become a state governed by the rule of law – a state which some nations in transition have now taken as their model. Nevertheless, Germany is also put to the test time and again, that is to say we question ourselves time and again.

When we witness attacks on homes for refugees or abuse on racist, anti-Semitic or xenophobic grounds nowadays, such deeds do, of course, provoke concerned questions about the weaknesses of our state and of our society when it comes to protecting human rights – and quite rightly so. Our response is clear, and it is the response not only of the Government, Parliament and the political class but also that of civil society: we react with absolute resolve when people are threatened, injured or even killed because perpetrators believe that they do not belong in our country. We stand up to them together.

Germany is championing human rights in many different ways. Take, for example, the support the German Government provides for health care in many African countries. Crisis prevention is one of the key elements of human rights policy, which is precisely why the Human Rights Council should serve as an early warning system. Making

progress here is extremely important if we are to ensure that not even more people in the world become victims of violence and injustice.

Let me move on to another aspect: the Human Rights Council also addresses potential new threats to individual freedom in the age of digitisation. Together with Brazil, Germany has worked more than any other country in the Human Rights Council to advance initiatives on the protection of digital privacy. I am pleased that these efforts have found broad backing.

However, your body's extensive agenda also reveals a dilemma: how can the Human Rights Council best cope with the increasing workload? After all, human rights work is undoubtedly also a matter of funding. However, money can only support what people are prepared to do. We need individuals with courage, individuals with determination, who are prepared to fight for fundamental freedoms and rights. I would like to take this opportunity to urge you to involve civil society in your work. Wherever fundamental rights are violated, the law of the strong prevails. We can only restore the strength of the law with the help of vigilant and courageous people who report violations to the international community and support victims on the ground. We also need the national institutions to protect and promote human rights. I welcome the fact that German policy makers have launched a legislative initiative to enable the German Institute for Human Rights to continue having the right to speak and participate at UN bodies.

The involvement of civil society in the work of the Human Rights Council must not, however, merely exist on paper. Human rights defenders must also be allowed to speak in the Human Rights Council in a fitting manner. I therefore call on you to foil the attempts to hinder or curtail the dialogue with representatives of civil society, for it is of vital importance.

We all know that the history of the United Nations undoubtedly gives some cause for criticism and complaints. However, do the pessimists have something better to offer? When the United Nations celebrates its 70th anniversary this year, there will, after all, certainly be reasons to look back with pride. For it is all too easily forgotten that the commitment to universal and indivisible validity of human rights has become established largely thanks to the United Nations. There is now a comprehensive convention on human rights in which it is recognised that states can no longer simply invoke national sovereignty when they violate human rights. There is talk of a "Copernican revolution in international law". Admittedly, this comparison also reminds us of how much time and effort it takes to bring about a paradigm change to ensure that protection of each and every individual is one of the international community's legitimate tasks. Unfortunately, in reality international allegations concerning

human rights violations are still often rejected as interference in domestic affairs.

Perhaps it would help if we remembered the following when it comes to tackling the difficult and complex challenges of protecting human rights: human rights are violated by human beings. Concomitant circumstances such as denial of freedom, violence and oppression must not blind us to the fact that there are always individual perpetrators. The fight against human rights violations is also ultimately about personal responsibility. Systems and structures which prevent fundamental rights from being respected and enforced are man-made. Changing this requires personal commitment – your commitment, too. For this task, I wish you courage, strength and stamina.