

**(only spoken word counts)**

**Speech University of Ghent  
75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Universal Declaration of Human Rights  
November 6, 2023**

Dear guests  
Dear rector

Thank you for inviting me on this special occasion.

And allow me to look at the issue from a more personal angle.

Human Rights are values of and for life.

Values define us. Values shape our destinies.

And without values... we are just lost.

As prime minister I am witness to moments of sheer joy.

Of great achievements in every field.

You see people thrive and flourish in every domain.

It is what I cherish the most: the everyday successes of people from different backgrounds and from all over the world.

They share their hopes and dreams.

What they strive for and how they will achieve their goals.

These are inspirational and encouraging exchanges.

The simple act of taking care of one another makes life so valuable.

It defines us as humans.

Our lives may be finite; our desire to live together in harmony is universal.

Humans are capable of the best when pulling together and recognizing what unites them.

But when in disunity or discord we also are also capable of the worst.

Regrettably the most abominable or despicable of acts of violence are inherent to humans.

War rages when people do not see eye to eye. When there is no common understanding of what the future can hold.

Two weeks ago, the Spanish prime minister Pedro Sanchez and I travelled together to the Middle East.

The region is close to our hearts for many reasons.

But the voice of the EU is not sufficiently heard.

Pedro Sanchez and I wanted to change that.

Our visit to the Middle East however brought our lives to a halt.

The sheer atrocities human beings inflict upon their fellow humans go beyond comprehension.

You just simply cannot come to terms with the cruelty people show towards neighbors.

In the Be'eri kibbutz people were slaughtered because they are Jews.

The terrorists of Hamas made no distinction between children, women, or men.

Their aim to kill as many people as possible is just barbaric.

A despicable act of hatred against the Jewish community.

And there is no justification for these attacks against peaceful communities.

The hostages the terrorists captured makes the sheer malice even more tangible.

What ensued was more cruelty.

In the Gaza strip the lives of citizens are ripped apart because they just happen to live there.

Thousands have perished and one can only wonder what will come next.

Children in Gaza now play on the rubble of houses, schools, and hospitals.

The future of the next generation lies under siege.

Hundreds of thousands of civilians have fled to the south and live in constant fear for their lives.

The international community has condemned the terrorist acts of Hamas, but it has also called upon the Israeli authorities to measure its response.

Too many civilians have lost their lives on the battlefield, and we will continue to say so.

Restore human dignity.

Respect the core values enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

It is the only true call for peace in the whole region.

We must and shall continue to defend humanity and solidarity.

Especially now.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights may be 75 years old.

Its ideals still stand.

But its ideals are also under severe pressure.

This gathering today invites us to reflect on the relevance of human rights, both in places like the Middle East or Ukraine but also closer to home.

The Universal Declaration originated from the ruins of World War II.

When our ancestors said, “no more”.

It stands as a monument that guides us towards a world in which dignity, equality and freedom are central.

The initiative to produce a document of this importance was a bold and courageous move.

It took nerve to hold humanity accountable for the horrors of the war and the shocking human rights violations that ensued.

The international community however saw it as its duty to come up with a universal framework that would protect the dignity and rights of all individuals.

The right to life, liberty and security, freedom of expression, the right to work and education, freedom of religion and the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of the individual and his or her family.

The relevance of the Universal Declaration remains undeniable today.

Especially when being confronted with atrocities like the ones we are witnessing.

The Declaration serves as a timeless compass.

But more importantly it has laid the ground for legislation all around the world.

Our rapidly evolving world is facing new challenges constantly.

You only need to look at technological advances, climate change or pandemics.

Here too the Universal Declaration remains relevant.

It gives a certain structure to establish ethical guidelines when dealing with these complex issues.

It provides us focus on ensuring equality, justice, and respect for human dignity.

As we celebrate the 75th anniversary of the Universal Declaration, it is time to look back at the progress made and look ahead to future challenges.

I know Ghent University commits itself to a positive social impact.

It is fitting that we gather here to discuss how the development of science and technology has gone hand in hand with the ideals of the Universal Declaration.

Science has undeniably changed and enriched our world.

Medical science has provided breakthroughs in the treatment of diseases, saving lives, and improving the quality of life.

Since 1990, the number of people living in extreme poverty has halved, according to the World Bank.

In absolute terms, this means that more than 1 billion people have been lifted out of poverty.

Advances in medical science have increased life expectancy and the quality of life worldwide.

Over the past 75 years, the average lifespan worldwide has increased by about 20 years.

Polio, for example, has almost been eradicated, and the incidence of diseases such as measles and tuberculosis has been significantly reduced.

Vaccination programmes have curbed epidemics and extended life expectancy.

Advances in agricultural technology have reduced famine and increased food security.

Communication is now instant and accessible worldwide.

The number of people with access to the internet has skyrocketed.

In 1990, less than 1% of the world's population had access to the internet, while today the number is around 60%.

However, amid these triumphs of science and technology, we cannot ignore the challenges.

Uncontrolled technological change can lead to ethical dilemmas and violations of basic human rights.

With the rise of artificial intelligence and biotechnology, the declaration has reminded us of the rights of every individual.

It has helped us establish and enforce ethical guidelines.

The balance between scientific progress and human rights is a delicate one that requires constant attention and effort.

Looking at history, these two forces have also reinforced each other.

Medical ethics, for example, has evolved to define the boundaries of scientific research, while safeguarding individual rights and privacy.

Scientific breakthroughs in reproductive medicine have given new hope to couples with fertility problems.

The rise of AI will lead to huge advances in areas such as healthcare, finance, and transport.

Algorithms can save lives through quicker diagnosis in the medical sector.

But algorithms also raise issues of privacy, transparency, and non-discrimination.

It is crucial that ethical implications are addressed in any scientific development.

We must ensure scientific progress benefits all humans, without any discrimination or violation of fundamental rights

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But first, let's acknowledge we've come a long way since 1948.

In most places in the world women's rights have become much more prominent than 75 years ago.

LGBTI+ rights were unheard of in '48.

And in recent years environmental rights or human rights in the digital sphere, have become hot topics.

The debate about human rights has evolved in time, as it should.

A second important fact I want to reflect upon, is my strong conviction that human rights are universal.

Some like to discredit the UDHR by saying it is a Western concept, a Western idea, pushed forward by the Western victors of the World War II.

This is not true, it is false and even worse, it's an attempt to undermine human rights.

At the negotiating table in '48 an Indian woman expert was present, representatives from Egypt, from China, from Lebanon, and many non-aligned countries.

Anyone who has travelled outside of Europe knows that the freedom of speech, freedom of worship, freedom from want, freedom from fear are rights that people all over the world aspire to.

But Human Rights are under pressure globally and within the European Union.

Look at the pushback against women's rights or the rise of nationalism and populism in Europe.

Close to our borders, the coups in the Sahel region cause instability in the whole of the African continent.

There are many sources of concern.

We cannot let down our guard.

Therefore the 75<sup>th</sup> UDHR anniversary is not a celebration, it's a commemoration – as the UN likes to coin it.

This brings me to what needs to be done.

More than ever, we need to defend our principles.

The respect, protection and promotion of human rights is one of the core principles of Belgium's interior and exterior policies.

Does this mean we always live up to our ideals. Of course not.

Should we therefore just stay silent when faced with large scale human rights violations within and outside of our countries?

Of course not, we should speak up if we want to be able to look ourselves in the mirror before going to bed.

I know Europe is often blamed of using double standards. And I can understand why.

We should avoid finger wagging or preaching.

But at least I can say that my government has strived to live up to the UDHR.

Let me share with you how we have strived to improve our policies.

Last year the federal government, after many years of indecisiveness, adopted a national action plan against racism.

This plan gives our government more tools and means to combat antisemitism, islamophobia, racism, and discrimination in all its forms and colours.

This was long overdue.

And although we have come a long way in combatting racism, I believe we – collectively – can still do so much more to embrace the diversity and openness of our Belgian society.

We shouldn't only do this because it's morally the right thing to do, it's also economically and socially in our self-interest.

A few months ago, the secretary of state announced that there were insufficient places to give single male asylum seekers a bed to sleep in in winter.

Although we are faced with record numbers of asylum seekers, we have gone all the way to create new places to accommodate asylum seekers.

The third and final example relates to the war in Gaza.

Since the atrocious attacks the Belgian government has defended Israel's right to defend its own population, the core task of every government.

But since day one we have also asked for restraint, for the release of all hostages, then for the respect for International Humanitarian Law and for unhindered humanitarian access.

Some say these were hollow words and nobody is listening.

But I'm 100% convinced of the opposite: many of the people in the region want to hear that Belgium and Europe care about their plight.

When innocent civilians in Kyiv or Gaza are killed, we should speak up if we want our voices to be credible.

And it's not just words that count.

Extremist settlers in the West Bank will be banned from entering Belgium.

The US Secretary of State Antony Blinken yesterday announced new visa restrictions targeting individuals involved in actions that undermine peace, security,

and stability in the West Bank.

Violence against civilians will have consequences.

We will work with the United States on these sanction measures and will push the EU to follow suit.

We are also upscaling our humanitarian aid and providing more shelters, emergency kits to the citizens of Gaza, relieving hospitals with extra medicines both in Gaza and in Egypt.

We are providing medical care to cancer patients or patients with severe burn wounds from Gaza who can no longer be treated there.

We have come a long way; the challenges seem daunting and difficult to overcome.

In difficult times, more than ever, we need a strong moral compass, and respect for human rights.

I count on the next generations to ensure that the following 75 years will lead us to a better, more inclusive, more prosperous world with truly universal enjoyment of human rights.

Use this conference as an opportunity to learn from each other's experiences and insights.

Dialogue is essential to ensure a sustainable and just future.

Let us strive together for a world where the Universal Declaration of Human Rights continues to serve as our resolute guide.

It is crucial that we leave no one behind and strive for a model where progress goes hand in hand with justice and equality.

Thank you for your attention and commitment to this important dialogue.