

*Check against delivery*

**Fifth Annual UN Forum on Business and Human Rights**



OFFICE OF THE HIGH COMMISSIONER FOR HUMAN RIGHTS

**Opening Statement by**

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**United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights**

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Distinguished President and Chair,  
Excellencies,  
Colleagues and friends,

I am delighted to welcome you all. Our gathering grows larger every year, as business leaders, members of government, activists and other stakeholders from all over the world recognise the importance of the agenda of this UN Forum on Business and Human Rights. I am encouraged to see States and corporations increasingly willing to discuss human rights issues with civil society organizations, whose voices ground our discussions in reality – in the challenges and abuses faced by so many communities and human rights defenders.

We are honoured that **Laura Cáceres** will be speaking at our closing session tomorrow. All of us were appalled by the murders of her mother, **Berta Cáceres**, and Berta's colleague **Nelson García** in Honduras earlier this year. They were killed defending the rights of indigenous people in the context of a hydroelectric dam project.

This was not an isolated incident. In many areas, corporations – including multinational businesses – have been increasingly linked to acts of intimidation and violence against human rights activists and workers. In 2015 alone, Global Witness documented the murder of 185 people who were defending human rights in the context of development projects in 16 countries. The industries involved included mining, agribusiness, hydroelectric dams, and logging. And almost 40 percent of the victims were indigenous people – women and men from communities whose rights to justice and a life in dignity continue to be very frequently ignored.

Gillian Caldwell, the head of Global Witness, will be speaking in the panel later this morning, so you will be able to discuss this at greater depth with her and many others.

States are primarily responsible for protecting the rights of their people. But companies also need to take a clear, unequivocal stance that they will not tolerate links to human rights abuses anywhere in their operations and supply chains.

Earlier this year the UN Human Rights Council once again raised the alarm about the need to protect human rights defenders in the context of economic activity and development. This call has been echoed by the Working Group on Business and Human Rights and other Special Procedures of the Council. And it has been picked up by many others – by journalists, activists, and the millions of ordinary men, women and children who do not want to contribute in any way to other people's pain.

That resonance of human rights concerns with the broader public is important. I personally believe that most business leaders are principled men and women who do not set out to cause harm. But they also increasingly realise that ignoring human rights creates risk. When human rights abuses take place in connection with the operations of any multinational company or investment group, that news is just one social media post away from massive and enduring reputational damage and financial fallout.

Many businesses are taking action to prevent and mitigate human rights abuse, and to address the dangers facing human rights defenders. Companies are setting up mechanisms to allow people to safely lodge complaints about adverse human rights impacts. They are

making pledges to take action on such complaints, and to use their leverage to protect human rights defenders who are under threat from State authorities, suppliers or business partners.

Some industry associations have also stepped forward to support human rights defenders. For example, when workers' activist **Andy Hall** was sued for criminal defamation by a Thai pineapple export firm because of his research into working conditions, the **Thai Frozen Foods Association** and **Thai Tuna Industry Association** provided bail and contributed to the payment of his fine. The retail chain **S Group**, which is represented here today, testified for the defence. Mr Hall is currently out of jail, though he is operating under a suspended sentence of imprisonment.

Investors and financial institutions are also starting to take steps to protect human rights defenders against brutality and abuses, and they are pledging a range of other actions to prevent and mitigate human rights risks. A growing number of financial institutions are seeking to integrate social and human rights criteria in their lending operations. Sector-specific initiatives such as the IFC Performance Standards and the Equator Principles incorporate elements of the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights.

Furthermore, the OECD has been doing important work with the financial sector to develop due diligence guidance for financial institutions. And I also note a promising recent agreement between Dutch banks, unions, NGOs and governmental authorities on responsible conduct regarding human rights in international banking.

One effect of this is that some financial institutions are divesting from projects linked to human rights abuses. This was the case of the Agua Zarca hydroelectric dam project in Honduras, where the **Dutch development bank FMO** and **Finnish development bank FinnFund** suspended funding after Berta Cáceres and Nelson García were killed.

This year's Forum puts the spotlight on the kind of leadership we have a right to expect from both States and businesses, to protect against human rights abuses. I hope there will be extensive discussion of the need for urgent action to safeguard human rights defenders. As the Chair of the Working Group on Business and Human Rights observed yesterday, the protection of their rights on the ground is the true test of our achievements here.

Thank you.