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**Event:**

**2020 Virtual UN Forum on Business and Human Rights**

**16-18 November 2020**

**“Preventing business-related human rights abuses:**

**The key to a sustainable future for people and planet”**

**Date/Time/Venue:** 16 November 2020, 14:00 CET (8:00 New York Time), online

(770 words)

Excellencies, Distinguished panelists, colleagues, ladies and gentlemen,

Please allow me to begin by congratulating our hosts, the UN Working Group on Business and Human Rights and OHCHR, for staging this important annual Forum as planned.

COVID-19 has triggered massive disruptions in economies, jobs and livelihoods. It has revealed the unsustainability of the pre-pandemic development path. Its socio-economic impacts feed on pre-pandemic vulnerabilities and inequalities across societies.

The last major global economic upheaval – the 2008 global financial crisis – did not lead to systemic change, as businesses that received bailouts without preconditions frequently reverted to business as usual.

This time, we should recognise the pandemic as a watershed moment that requires states and corporations to change their modus operandi, forging a new normal of business in respect for human rights, based upon the UN Guiding Principles.

The Covid-19 pandemic has been a painful reminder of the need for prevention, the central theme of this year’s discussion. All stakeholders need to invest in preventing societies from descending into further crises and to safeguard development gains towards achievement of the 2030 Agenda.

Some of the most dramatic outcomes of the current crisis could have been mitigated, had prevention measures been put in place to reduce inequality and to strengthen laws, policies and institutions that uphold human rights.

A key such preventive measure would be to give effect to the UN Guiding Principles. They reinforce our calls to tackle this crisis head on by “building forward better”, clearly setting out the responsibilities of businesses and directing them to take a sustainable, people-centered path and to help address the key issues of our age, including social equality and climate change.

The Guiding Principles also enshrine the responsibilities of governments, and should also guide their response to the pandemic, particularly when extending financial support to struggling companies. Governments should insist that any financial help is contingent on businesses respecting human rights and the dignity of workers and communities they impact.

Distinguished participants,

This should also serve as a key lesson learned: we should ensure that businesses and governments prevent future harm by acting in accordance with the Guiding Principles. This will put us in a better position to address other looming crises such as:

* the ongoing expansion of big tech and surveillance, and its profound human rights impacts;
* the overreliance on fossil fuels that requires us to kick start a transition to a green economy; and
* the rising impact of businesses on increasingly intense and complex conflicts.

As we await a vaccine for Covid-19, all of us, including businesses, can inoculate ourselves against some of the worst effects of these and other crises, by adhering to the UN Guiding Principles.

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Next year, the Principles turn 10, and their staying power and growing uptake is a testament to the vision of Professor Ruggie. They have been followed by other promising initiatives, including the EU’s efforts to introduce legislation on mandatory environmental and human rights due diligence, and encouraging progress in Asia marked by the recent adoption of a National Action Plan in my home country, Japan. National Action Plans are also being drafted with UNDP support in Pakistan, Indonesia, Mongolia and India. In other regions, including Africa and the Arab states, there is a need to scale up efforts made to date.

These efforts will inform the Road Map for the next decade of implementation of the UNGPs, which UNDP is very proud to contribute to, in partnership with the UN Working Group. Our Rule of Law and Human Rights Programme has developed a Global Initiative on Business and Human Rights in five regions, through which our teams in Asia, Africa, Arab States, Latin America and Eastern Europe and Central Asia will collect inputs for the roadmap through multi-stakeholder dialogues.

One important such opportunity will be the inaugural Regional Forum on Business and Human Rights for Eastern Europe and Central Asia, hosted by UNDP from 23-25 November.

That event, along with this Forum and all of UNDP’s work in the field of business and human rights, shows the UN’s commitment to the Secretary General’s Vision on Prevention. To realise it, we are engaged in building meaningful partnerships. Indeed, partnerships among UN agencies, Governments, regional organisations, NGOs, academia and the private sector and others are a major reason for the increased recognition of the Business and Human Rights agenda, as exemplified by this Forum.

UNDP’s efforts to ensure public participation and civic space reflect the ethos of the Secretary General’s Call for Action on Human Rights. We will continue to strive together with partners to ensure that businesses act responsibly through a strong, inclusive multilateralism that places human rights at its very centre.

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