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10 October 2024

Open letter from Volker Türk, United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, on priorities for human rights-based biodiversity action at the 16th Conference of the Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity

Excellency,

Between now and the end of this year, States will come together at four pivotal environmental negotiations, seeking to stop and reverse biodiversity loss, get back on track to limit global heating to 1.5 degrees Celsius, end plastic pollution, and halt land degradation. This offers an opportunity for the international community to act on the commitments in the Pact for the Future to achieve a world in which humanity lives in harmony with nature, and to centre human rights in efforts to take on the planetary crisis. My Office will be there to support these goals.

As the first of the four negotiations beginning later this month, it is important that the 16th Conference of the Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity (COP 16) set the tone by prioritizing people and the planet. The theme of COP 16, peace with nature, is welcome in this regard, as is the commitment of the COP 16 Presidency to human rights-based environmental action. I urge all States to work together to ensure that the outcomes of COP 16 are consistent with these promising beginnings.

In particular, I urge commitments at COP 16 as follows.

1. Affirm and operationalize a human rights-based approach to biodiversity

Sustainable environmental outcomes cannot be achieved without respecting and upholding human rights. In the context of action to protect biodiversity, a specific commitment to adopting a human rights-based approach was taken by States in the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework in 2022.

All Permanent Representatives
of Member States and Permanent Observers
of non-Member States to the United Nations Office at Geneva



Each of the key decisions made at COP 16 – on issues ranging from marine, coastal and island biodiversity to the nexus between biodiversity and climate – offers an opportunity to operationalize this commitment, and to ensure a human rights-based approach that will lead to more effective and just conservation outcomes. I also urge that human rights be taken into account in deciding the topics for new areas of work under the Convention on Biological Diversity, as well as in the recommendation for a fast-track assessment to the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES).

2. Uphold the rights of Indigenous Peoples and others disproportionately affected by biodiversity loss

Biodiversity loss disproportionately impacts those who depend directly on nature for their livelihoods and culture. Its impacts also differ depending on gender, age and other factors. For this reason, I would urge that COP 16 integrate the rights of Indigenous Peoples [including those set out in the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples], along with considerations of gender equality and intergenerational equity, in its outcomes. In particular, COP 16 is an opportunity to adopt a new programme of work under Article 8(j) and other provisions of the Convention on Biological Diversity related to Indigenous Peoples, and local communities. A new subsidiary body could also be established under the Convention to reflect the key role of Indigenous Peoples, and local communities, in protecting biodiversity.

3. Protect civic space and the right to culture

Target 22 of the Global Biodiversity Framework includes a specific call for States to ensure inclusive participation in decision-making and to protect environmental human rights defenders. This is in line with international human rights law. Yet, many environmental human rights defenders are killed each year, while others experience intimidation and violence, or are criminalized for carrying out peaceful activities in defense of their culture and the environment. COP 16 is an opportunity for concrete commitments to stop these unconscionable attacks and to ensure decision-making processes are transparent, inclusive, participatory, and safe for all.

4. Mobilize resources for human rights-based biodiversity action

I urge that human rights also be taken into account in resource mobilization efforts for biodiversity action. In particular, it would be important that the COP 16 decision on resource mobilization explicitly call for States to take measures to align all biodiversity-related financial flows – international, domestic, public and private, including from international and regional financial institutions and development banks – with human rights obligations. It is also important to call for the private sector to respect human rights in line with the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights.



5. Integrate human rights indicators in the monitoring framework for biodiversity action

The current monitoring framework for the Global Biodiversity Framework does not include indicators that would enable us specifically to track progress toward achievement of a human rights-based approach to biodiversity. My Office contributed to the work of the Ad Hoc Technical Expert Group on Indicators and is happy to continue to provide technical expertise in support of the elaboration of additional indicators. As a first step, COP 16 could agree to new indicators on target 22 of the Framework, including the adoption of an indicator on land use change and land tenure in the territories of Indigenous Peoples, and local communities. Effectively measuring progress toward achievement of all the objectives of the Global Biodiversity Framework is essential to informing and catalysing evidence-based action.

I wish you successful negotiations at COP 16 and urge you to reflect human rights in all of your deliberations – for people, for the planet and for our future.

Please accept, Excellency, the assurances of my highest consideration.

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Volker Türk', is positioned above the printed name.

Volker Türk