Ambassadors, colleagues, friends,
Good evening, bonsoir, goedenavond,

I wish you a very warm welcome. My name is Birgit Van Hout and I am the Regional Representative for Europe of the United Nations Human Rights Office. It is a role that I approach with a deep sense of responsibility and humility.

You may have thought that you were coming for a movie and a reception. Well, let’s say that was half of the truth. We also have a few other things in store for you.

First, I must ask your indulgence for a few speeches which will last for about 20 minutes, total. Then, we will watch the amazing movie of the life of my colleague, Chris Mburu. Chris is our Human Rights representative in Rwanda, and we are delighted that he has travelled all the way from Kigali to be here today.

You heard our High Commissioner Zeid in the video: “standing up for human rights starts with you,” he said. So, after the movie, that’s where you come in, for a conversation with Chris and my colleague Dima about what you can do to make our world a better place – yes, you! After that, we invite you for drinks. And, for those who stay until the end of the programme, we have a small gift which you will receive at the exit.

The United Nations or UN is what we call an inter-governmental organization, made up by all States in the world. This means that the UN can only act if there is agreement among member States. When there is no such agreement, the UN cannot impose its will. I wanted to clarify this at the outset, because, as we witness terrible human rights crises in Syria, Palestine, South Sudan or Yemen, the UN is often blamed for the failure of its member States.

Now, the UN Charter starts with the words “we, the people.” That means that the UN belongs to all of us, not only to State institutions. Advancing human rights is a core purpose of the UN. In 1948, countries with different histories, cultures, languages and religions agreed on a common set of principles, in a document called the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. It is a commitment by all States to protect and promote human rights.
Today, we are launching a full year of commemorations for the 70th anniversary of the Universal Declaration. It sets out, in 30 articles, the civil, cultural, economic, political and social rights that we all hold. Over the past 50 years, another 9 human rights treaties were adopted to address specific human rights violations, like torture or racism, or to protect certain groups, like women, children, persons with disabilities or migrants. Most of these treaties have been ratified by national Parliaments across Europe. I would like to emphasize that governments were not coerced by the UN to sign up. They did so voluntarily, and when they did, these treaties became binding legal obligations and States became what we call duty-bearers with a responsibility towards individuals or right-holders. So human rights are a branch of international law.

There are several UN mechanisms that monitor the extent to which States fulfill these obligations and you may have heard of the treaty bodies, the Human Rights Council or Special Procedures and I am very honored that we have the Special Rapporteur on the rights of indigenous people with us this evening. Where there are allegations of human rights violations, individuals and organizations can bring complaints to these mechanisms and they, in turn, provide recommendations. It is an international system of accountability.

In 1993, the General Assembly created the UN Human Rights Office with the mandate to the protect and promote human rights. We are a small UN entity with headquarters in Geneva and some 60 field presences in all regions. Our budget is very modest: even though human rights are one of the 3 pillars of the UN – next to development and peace & security –, we receive less than 3% of the UN budget and rely heavily on voluntary contributions. I would like to seize this opportunity to thank the European Union and the government and people of Belgium for their support to our work around the world.

Now, I would like to tell you a bit about our regional office here in Brussels. No country is free from human rights violations, and part of our work is to collect information about human rights and channel it to the UN monitoring mechanisms that I mentioned earlier, as well as to facilitate the engagement of both States and civil society with these mechanisms.

We leverage the moral authority of the UN to persuade and assist governments and the European institutions (to which governments have transferred certain competencies) to align their laws, policies and practices with the UN treaties. To give you a very concrete example, we work to end administrative immigration detention of children, which, according to international jurisprudence, is never in the best interest of the child.

Our role as custodians of the 9 human rights treaties leads to the interesting paradox that, even though we are an organization of States, we may find ourselves in difficult and critical conversations with governments on a range of human rights questions. Mostly, we engage in
quiet diplomacy and it is a challenge for the UN today to demonstrate its value when much of what we do is preventive and takes place behind the scenes.

The good thing is that there is also a lot of goodwill and we are often solicited by European countries and the EU for technical advice and assistance. Soon, you will hear from two EU partners with whom we work to integrate in human rights in EU policies towards third countries. But our core mandate is to protect and promote human rights and rule of law here, in the 28 countries of the Union.

- Did you know that it remains difficult for victims of terrorism to claim their human rights and that there are great differences in the support that is provided by European countries to these victims?
- Did you know that, as we are spending a cozy night at the theater, many older persons in Europe suffer isolation and abuse?
- Did you know that austerity measures have severely impacted the economic and social rights of both pensioners and youth in parts of Europe?
- Did you know that the number of homeless has increased dramatically in all but one country of the EU, particularly youth homelessness? Did you know that adequate housing is a human right? There are sustainable solutions for homelessness that go beyond shelters and soup kitchens, but regrettably insufficient political will has been mustered to really solve this profound deprivation of human dignity.
- Did you know that 27% of the Roma in Europe report hunger in their household? The stigmatization of the Roma population remains deeply engrained in European societies and is characterized by their segregation in all spheres of life. At the same time, the fact that a handful of countries are making progress shows that improving the situation of Roma is not impossible and that good practices do exist.
- Did you know that on average women earn 20% less than men in the EU and that if the European Investment Bank’s lending practices were more gender sensitive, millions of women could be economically empowered across Europe? But maybe we must wait for at least 1 woman to be appointed to the 9-member Management Committee of the Bank.
- Did you know that 30% of afro-descendants or persons with a Muslim name say that it remains very difficult for them to access the job market even when they have the required qualifications?
- Did you know that, according to international law, all children should be enabled to join mainstream education, and there should be no ghetto schools or separate education system for persons with disabilities?
- Speaking about persons with disabilities, did you know that much of public transportation in Europe remains inaccessible for them? Also, UN mechanisms have criticized several European countries for investing in institutions rather than in family and community based care which is more humane and cheaper.
Did you know that bullying in school remains a common reality for sexual minorities in certain countries, often leaving scars for life?

Human rights are not unrealistic or unachievable. We know that, because we have already made a lot of progress since the adoption of the Universal Declaration 70 years ago. The 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda, which is built on human rights, is a renewed opportunity for European countries to make sure that, as they move forward, no one is left behind. We consider it our role, to be a voice for the voiceless, starting with those most behind and most disenfranchised first.

Yet, it is at the national and local levels that human rights must eventually be realized, and change must come from within. Therefore, an important part of our work is to empower national human rights institutions, equality bodies, and civil society organizations, so they can hold their governments to account. Several of our civil society partners are with us this evening and I would like to pay tribute to all of you for your tireless efforts, often with very little recognition or salary. You know who you are.

The Polish philosopher Zygmunt Bauman said that “the best possible society is one that is always aware of its imperfections and continuously strives to overcome them.” For many years, I worked on human rights issues that were not related to Europe and when I came back after 20 years, what struck me most, was the increased acceptance of hate speech and the demonization of political correctness. I had to remember what an activist working against anti-Semitism once told me: “when we are not politically correct, it is always at the expense of the more vulnerable in society, often women and minorities. Political incorrectness never targets persons of privilege.”

It is true: globalization, terrorism, and growing inequality have caused a sense of loss, fear and insecurity throughout Europe. It has left many of us with a feeling that we are losing control. It has also created fertile ground for xenophobia. Legitimate grievances must be listened to and addressed. At the same time, we should be weary of those who exploit our fears for political gain. Let us be proud of our identity, while accepting that identities have never been static and evolve over time. Let us cherish an identity that is not a straight-jacket, but that allows for multiple identities. Let us take pride in our culture, language, and history without excluding persons of a different background.

Human rights are much more than a set of treaties. They are moral values and a philosophy of life. Respect for human rights is deeply rooted in European culture and values. Yet, some feel that time has come to be more pragmatic about human rights. Some say human rights are something for idealists, leftists or liberals. In some quarters, we even hear a growing anti-human rights discourse. Yet, rollbacks and restrictions have never advanced any country, and
as our High Commissioner said last week, what is the alternative: an international order based on power politics, absolute sovereignty, inward-looking hyper-nationalism and more conflict? Is that such an appealing prospect?

The violation of human rights protected under international law cannot be an internal affair of any government. The rule of law principle shields individuals from abuse of power and serves as a guarantor for democracy. It should never be reduced to a rule by law principle that undermines civil and political freedoms or the independence of the judiciary. It is unconscionable that, today, in some parts of Europe, freedoms are being emptied of their meaning and human rights defenders fear reprisals for submitting information to the UN human rights mechanisms – or even for meeting with me.

I wanted to give you an idea of the work of our office, because as a taxpayer, you are a shareholder, we call it stakeholder, and we are accountable to you. On behalf of the UN Human Rights Office, I want you to know that we are grateful for the indispensable support you provide through your contribution to the UN budget. I would like to invite you to follow us on Facebook (UN Human Rights Europe), so that we can continue to inform you and you can also send us your feedback.

The theme of this year’s Human Rights Day is “Stand up for human rights.” You have rights and, as Eleanor Roosevelt so wisely said, “with rights comes responsibility.” Human rights are not about politics; they are not about being left, right or center. You do not need to be a lawyer or a politician to stand up for human rights. You do not have to work for the UN or for an international human rights organization.

At first sight, the movie you will see tonight is about the right to education in Africa, but it is also about much more than that. It is about the difference one individual can make. It is about the potential in each of us to be an agent of change. Tonight, we would like to invite you to reflect on what you can do, in your home, at work, in your community, with your school, university or company, in your city, your country. Reflect, promote, engage: these are the 3 themes of we have chosen to celebrate the Universal Declaration.

Ever since human rights were coined, there has been both progress and setbacks. We need a broad alliance to keep us moving forward. We hope you will join us. By standing up for the human rights of others, we also stand up for our own rights and those of generations to come.

Thank you.