

International Human Rights Institutions under Pressure

A Statement of the Executive Committee of Justice and Peace Europe on the occasion of the International Human Rights Day (10 December 2025)

This year's Human Rights Day comes at a moment of growing strain on the international human rights system. Institutions that were created to give universal protection to human dignity, are facing unprecedented political challenges. Justice & Peace Europe therefore decided to dedicate its 2025 Human Rights Day Statement to this worrying tendency, providing a short reflection and offering some operational recommendations to counter this phenomenon.

Almost every day, we read in the news about serious human rights violations: In El Fasher, Sudan, hundreds of people were killed in a hospital in an attack by the RSF militia in October. In Kharkiv, Ukraine, a kindergarten was attacked by a drone – as so often in its senseless war against Ukraine, the aggressor Russia deliberately targeted civilian infrastructure. The United States has been accused by UN experts¹ of breaching international law by striking alleged drug-trafficking vessels in the Caribbean and killing more than 80 people on board extrajudicially. The UN Group of Human Rights Experts on Nicaragua (UNGHREN) has reported² to the UN General Assembly on arbitrary detentions, enforced disappearances, torture and targeted repression against Christian institutions in the country. In Iran, more than a thousand people have already been executed this year, including many political opponents of the regime. These horrible examples make it clear that living in peace and dignity is not possible if the international community stands idly by and watches such injustice. A strong human rights system with strong human rights institutions is needed to ensure accountability. *“There is a need to ensure the uncontested rule of law”* (cf. [Fratelli Tutti](#), 173).

The year 2025, however, has regrettably seen a further weakening of the international human rights system. The US withdrew from the Universal Periodic Review process of the United Nations Human Rights Council — a mechanism designed to ensure that all states are accountable before one another for their human rights record. This unprecedented step undermines the universality of the system and sets a worrying precedent that others may follow. At the same time, the influence of authoritarian governments within the UN human rights structures continues to expand. Under the banner of “sovereignty” and “non-interference,” some states seek to weaken international scrutiny and redefine human rights in ways that erode their universality and indivisibility. We also note with great concern that some states, in particular the Russian Federation and the People's Republic of China, are

¹ <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2025/09/us-war-narco-terrorists-violates-right-life-warn-un-experts-after-deadly> .

² <https://www.ohchr.org/en/hr-bodies/hrc/ghre-nicaragua/index> .

systematically working towards defunding the UN human rights system by blocking or cutting funding for the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) and the Human Rights Council designated for the investigation of human rights violations worldwide.³

The International Criminal Court (ICC) also faces serious challenges. In 2025, Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger and Hungary announced their withdrawal from the Rome Statute, joining the ranks of states that have distanced themselves from the Court's jurisdiction. Moreover, the US government imposed sanctions on certain ICC magistrates and officials. These decisions weaken accountability for the gravest crimes at a time, when conflicts are multiplying and impunity is on the rise.

Even in Europe, the system of protection is under threat. In May 2025, several European governments called for a "review" of the European Convention on Human Rights and the jurisprudence of the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR), arguing that it unduly constrains national sovereignty. This political climate risks eroding the authority of the Court and the binding nature of its judgments, which are essential for upholding the rule of law and protecting vulnerable persons, including migrants and asylum seekers.

We, as Justice & Peace Europe, find these developments deeply troubling. We believe that the human person - created in the image of God - possesses an inalienable dignity that precedes and transcends state sovereignty. It is incumbent on States not only to protect human dignity but also *"to guarantee the conditions necessary for it to flourish in the integral promotion of the human person"* (cf. *Dignitas infinita*, 65). International institutions for human rights were established as expressions of the moral unity of the human family bound by mutual responsibility. When states withdraw from these mechanisms or attempt to subordinate them to political convenience, they wound the very fabric of international solidarity, justice and accountability.

The current erosion of human rights institutions thus represents not only a legal or political crisis but also a moral one. This moral crisis is intensified by an emerging view of human rights that detaches them from the inherent dignity of the human person. When dignity is reduced to subjective preference rather than recognised as intrinsic and universal, rights lose their ethical foundation and become vulnerable to political or ideological redefinition. A coherent human rights order requires a stable understanding of the human person, whose dignity precedes the state and anchors the universality of all rights.

These considerations call for a renewed commitment to the institutions that safeguard human dignity. Justice & Peace Europe therefore urges renewed commitment to the international human rights system and calls on states, decision-making bodies in the Council of Europe, European Union and concerned entities at world level to:

- Ensure that discussions on human rights remain anchored in an understanding of human dignity that is intrinsic, universal and not subject to political or ideological revision;

³ <https://ishr.ch/defenders-toolbox/resources/report-how-states-try-to-defund-human-rights-at-the-un/>

- reaffirm their participation in and cooperation with international and regional human rights mechanisms, including the UN Human Rights Council, the ICC and the ECtHR;
- speak and act consistently in defence of international law and human rights institutions;
- reinforce multilateral cooperation and ensure the credibility of human rights institutions and mechanisms primarily through compliance with their decisions;
- uphold the universality and indivisibility of human rights, rejecting selective approaches based on political interests;
- support national, regional and international independent human rights institutions and pertinent civil society efforts;
- ensure that human rights institutions are adequately funded to enable them to fulfil their mandates, in particular the investigation of human rights violations worldwide;
- promote a culture of respect for the human dignity and human rights in our societies through education and awareness raising.

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Executive Committee of Justice and Peace Europe