

Human Rights Council debates situation of human rights in the Syrian Arab Republic in Special Session

MORNING

29 April 2011

The Human Rights Council this morning convened a Special Session concerning the “situation of human rights in the Syrian Arab Republic”. The session was convened after the Council received a request from the United States, backed by 15 other Member States and signed by 21 Observer States.

In opening remarks, Kyung-Wha Kang, United Nations Deputy High Commissioner for Human Rights, said that the recent events in Syria warranted the Council’s urgent attention. Information gathered since mid-March painted a disturbing picture: the widespread use of live fire against protestors; the arrest, detention and disappearance of demonstrators, human rights defenders, and journalists; the torture and ill-treatment of detainees; the sharp repression of press freedoms and other means of communication; and attacks against medical personnel, facilities and patients. The preponderance of information that had emerged from Syria depicted a widespread, persistent and gross disregard for human rights by the Syrian military and security forces. Syrian and international human rights organizations documented more than 450 killings and around four times that number of injuries.

Ms. Kang went on to say that the lessons from the recent events across the Middle East and North Africa clearly demonstrated that violent repression of peaceful protest did not resolve the grievances of people; on the contrary, it risked the creation of a downward spiral of anger, violence, killing and chaos. Syria was a State party to nearly all of the core international human rights treaties, including the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. Syria should ensure that the rights of life, liberty and security of persons were protected in all circumstances, including in the context of efforts to maintain law and order. Syria also had a responsibility to protect its population from crimes against humanity and other international crimes.

The Council was also addressed in a videotaped message on behalf of several Special Procedures by Olivier de Schutter, Special Rapporteur on the right to food. Mr. de Schutter said that the Special Rapporteurs had received reports that serious human rights violations were being committed in Syria and that the Government security forces and the army had used disproportionate and indiscriminate force. The Special Rapporteurs had stressed that this use of force was in clear violation of international law and they called upon the Government of Syria to immediately stop the use of deadly force and to protect its own people. The Special Rapporteurs also called upon the Government to respect its human rights obligations, in particular with regard to the non-derogable rights to life and to freedom from torture and ill-treatment.

The delegation of Syria took the floor as a concerned country and said it was astonished at the convening of the Special Session and the use of artificial motives, including the pretext of humanitarian intervention, to take the world back to the era of colonization.

The States that had convened this Special Session should respect dialogue to guarantee human rights and not intervene in internal affairs to overthrow a government. For the past six weeks there were demonstrations for political reform and the Syrian President had issued directives to the public order bodies not to use force or violence against the demonstrators. The public order bodies had maximized the use of self restraint and issued the necessary laws, including the abolishment of the state of emergency, which was still in effect in Israel since 1948. The State High Security Court was abolished and a new legislative decree was promulgated for the right to peaceful protest for the first time in Syrian history. There were vandals that were engaged in acts of violence, 60 officers and conscripts were killed and there was the destruction of public institutions. What would the countries that had convened this Special Session have done if such acts occurred in their own countries?

Representatives of Member States then took the floor to make comments. Many condemned the use of violence against peaceful demonstrators and reminded all States that violent repression of protests was contrary to international human rights obligations. States also called on Syria to release political prisoners and human rights defenders, including those arrested as part of the peaceful protests. States also called on Syrian authorities to investigate alleged human rights violations and to bring those responsible to justice through fair, impartial, transparent, and independent processes. Speakers urged the Syrian government to cooperate with the United Nations mechanisms by allowing country visits by the Office of the High Commissioner and relevant Special Procedures mandate holders. Several speakers noted that the conduct of the Syrian authorities was not in keeping with eligibility criteria for membership on the Human Rights Council and they therefore called on Syria to withdraw its candidacy to the Council and urged other States not to support the country's candidacy.

Numerous speakers said that the convening of this Special Session violated the principles of impartiality and non-selectivity on which the Human Rights Council was based and showed the prevalence of a double standard in the Council. Many States also expressed the belief that the Special Session represented an attempt by some States to interfere in the internal affairs of another UN Member State on humanitarian grounds, and the Council should not be used for such purposes. Many speakers noted that Syria had begun to address some of the demands raised by protesters including the rescinding of the state of emergency, the abolition of the high security court, and a law promulgating the right to freedom of peaceful assembly, and that the Council should engage in constructive dialogue with Syria in order to continue these reforms and promote and protect human rights in the country.

Speaking during this morning's debate were representatives from the following Member States: Hungary on behalf of the European Union, Nigeria on behalf of the African Group, Palestine on behalf of the Arab Group, the United Kingdom, France, Spain, Poland, Brazil, Ecuador, Thailand, Uruguay, Chile, China, Cuba, Guatemala, the United States, Slovakia, the Russian Federation, Mexico, the Republic of Korea, Pakistan on behalf of the Organization for the Islamic Conference, the Maldives, Bangladesh, Japan, Malaysia, Switzerland, Mauritius, Norway, Belgium and Mauritania.

The Council will meet this afternoon at 3 p.m. to continue the Special Session and consider the proposed draft resolution.

Opening Statements

KYUNG -WHA KANG, United Nations Deputy High Commissioner for Human Rights, said the recent events in Syria warranted the Council's urgent attention. Information gathered since mid-March painted a disturbing picture: the widespread use of live fire against protestors; the arrest, detention and disappearance of demonstrators, human rights defenders, and journalists; the torture and ill-treatment of detainees; the sharp repression of press freedoms and other means of communication; and attacks against medical personnel, facilities and patients. The preponderance of information that had emerged from Syria depicted a widespread, persistent and gross disregard for human rights by the Syrian military and security forces. Syrian and international human rights organizations documented more than 450 killings and around four times that number of injuries. The lessons from the recent events across the Middle East and North Africa clearly demonstrated that violent repression of peaceful protests did not resolve the grievances of people; on the contrary, it risked the creation of a downward spiral of anger, violence, killing and chaos.

Syria was a State party to nearly all of the core international human rights treaties, including the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. Syria should ensure that the rights of life, liberty and security of persons were protected in all circumstances, including in the context of efforts to maintain law and order. Syria also had a responsibility to protect its population from crimes against humanity and other international crimes. The Secretary-General and the High Commissioner had repeatedly called on the Government of Syria to halt violence against protestors; to immediately engage in a broad, inclusive, and constructive dialogue regarding their legitimate desire for increased respect for their human rights; to open a full, independent investigation into credible allegations of violations and to take action to ensure that perpetrators of violations would be brought to justice. The Deputy High Commissioner emphasized the importance of holding perpetrators of serious human rights violations accountable and in this regard there was an urgent need for an independent, impartial, effective and prompt investigation into recent events in Syria. The convening of this Special Session should convey to the people of Syria that the international community was aware of their plight and supported their struggle for fundamental rights and freedoms and should affirm to people everywhere that the Human Rights Council would be resolute in ensuring justice for victims of human rights violations worldwide.

OLIVIER DE SCHUTTER, Special Rapporteur on the right to food, in a videotaped message on behalf of several Special Procedures, said that over the past weeks, the Human Rights Council had witnessed a wave of protests across the Syrian Arab Republic, in other countries of the region and other parts of the world. There had been peaceful calls for democratic reforms and respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. The Special Rapporteurs had received reports that serious human rights violations were being committed in Syria and that the Government security forces and the army had used disproportionate and indiscriminate force. The Special Rapporteurs had stressed that this use of force was in clear violation of international law. The Special

Procedures mandate holders of the United Nations Human Rights Council called upon the Government of Syria to immediately stop the use of deadly force and to protect its own people. The Special Rapporteurs called upon the Government to respect its human rights obligations, in particular with regard to the non-derogable rights to life and to freedom from torture and ill-treatment.

Statement by Country Concerned

FAYSAL KHABBAS HAMOUI (Syrian Arab Republic), speaking as a concerned country, said it was astonished at the convening of the Special Session and the use of artificial motives, including the pretext of humanitarian intervention, to take the world back to the era of colonization. The States that had convened this Special Session should respect dialogue to guarantee human rights and not intervene in internal affairs to overthrow a government. For the past six weeks there were demonstrations for political reform and the Syrian President issued directives to the public order bodies not to use force or violence against the demonstrators. The public order bodies had maximized the use of self-restraint and issued the necessary laws, including the abolition of the state of emergency, which was still in effect in Israel since 1948. The State High Security Court was abolished and a new legislative decree was promulgated for the right to peaceful protest for the first time in Syrian history. There were vandals that were engaged in acts of violence, 60 officers and conscripts were killed and there was the destruction of public institutions. What would the countries that had convened this Special Session have done if such acts occurred in their own countries? The economic situation of the country had come to a halt and the State was obligated to shoulder its responsibilities.

Syria was made up of a cohesive social fabric and any marginalization or persecution against the unity of this fabric by extremist or other groups would be rejected. Syria would continue with determined steps to complete reforms and would not be lenient with those who threatened its citizens. The holding and convening of this Session and placing pressure on Member States to support the draft resolution was a message that went to the vandals and supported chaos and destruction in the country. Syria said that the delegation of the United States insisted on producing an unjust and dangerous resolution removed from fact. Syria would continue to respect its international commitments and remain keen on strengthening human rights and its march to reforms.

Statements by Member States

ANDRAS DEKANY (Hungary), speaking on behalf of the European Union, said that the Council could not ignore the situation in the Syrian Arab Republic. The Council had to address the human rights dimension of the developments and remind all States that violent repression of protests was contrary to international human rights obligations. The European Union was extremely concerned at the situation of human rights in the Syrian Arab Republic. The European Union condemned the use of brutal force, in particular the use of live ammunition, by the security forces against peaceful demonstrators across Syria, which had resulted in high numbers of killed and wounded. The European Union called for the immediate release of all political prisoners and human rights defenders, including those arrested in connection with the peaceful demonstrations. The European Union called on Syrian authorities to investigate the alleged human rights violations and

to bring those responsible to account through a fair, impartial, transparent, and independent process. The European Union urged the Syrian government to cooperate with the United Nations mechanisms by allowing country visits by the Office of the High Commissioner and relevant Special Procedures mandate holders; cooperation with the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights was essential.

OSITADINMA ANAEDU (Nigeria), speaking on behalf of the African Group, said that the African Group recognized the importance of the Council being cautious and never setting a precedent that would destabilize Member States of the United Nations. The African Group said that in accordance with the provisions of General Assembly Resolution 60/251, all initiatives in the Human Rights Council should be universal, impartial, objective and non-selective. The African Group urged the Syrian authorities and the good people of Syria to never relent in their efforts in avoiding any further loss of life or escalation of the situation. The African Group encouraged the Syrian authorities to guarantee the protection and security of citizens and ensure that necessary assistance was provided to the injured and the population in need. The African Group welcomed all the steps taken so far by the Syrian Arab Republic to meet the legitimate demands for reform and encouraged it to continue the national dialogue with a view to responding to those demands. The African Group urged Member States of the United Nations to guard against capitalizing on the events in Syria to escalate the situation or seek to make any political gains.

IBRAHIM KHRAISHI (Palestine), on behalf of the Arab Group, said that because this was the principle of dialogue and non-selectivity that should prevail, Syria reacted to these events by proceeding with reforms and lifting the state of emergency in line with the provisions of human rights and they had to welcome these reforms. The fact that the Council called for the respect of rights should not be used as an excuse to carry out acts of sabotage and murders and they expressed their sincere condolences for these acts. Palestine welcomed articles 21 and 25 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and no obstacle should be created to these provisions, other than those provided by law. Any government should protect innocent civilians and respect the rights of peaceful demonstrators and the Council should continue its dialogue and avoid any attempt to intervene and impose sanctions. The message delivered to the Syrian government should be a message of dialogue and cooperation to continue reforms and the Council was sending the wrong message, a message of selective approach. They rejected any attempt to undermine the rights of any country and interfere in the internal affairs of the country.

PETER GOODERHAM (United Kingdom), said that the Syrian Government had a responsibility to respect and protect the basic and universal rights of its citizens. The Syrian authorities should respect the rights to freedom of expression and association of their people. Justice for the victims for this and any continued repressive violence through fair and independent investigations was vital. The Syrian authorities should cooperate with the United Nations human rights framework, allowing immediate access to Special Procedures mandate holders and the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights. The United Kingdom strongly encouraged all members of the Council to support the draft resolution that was currently being negotiated.

AGUSTIN SANTOS MARAVER (Spain), said that it supported the organization of this Special Session and that Syria found itself at a crossroads and since January there had been 450 victims. The Government of Syria was responsible for protecting the human rights of its citizens, putting an end to the fight against terrorism and the acts of paramilitary groups. The rule of law should be constructed through respect for human rights and there had been no alternative presented to end the conflict. Spain said those detained should be released and there should be an investigation of human rights violations and those responsible should be brought to court. There should be a mission to Syria from the High Commissioner with a report presented to the Council at the 17th session.

JEAN-BAPTISTE MATTEI (France), said that they condemned the repression in Syrian and it was unacceptable. This violence should stop and they could not sit in silence as the level of repression increased, which was why France supported the convening of this Special Session. It was crucial for the Council to send a message of condemnation against this violence and guarantee freedom of expression, assembly and of the press. The lifting of a state of emergency should be implemented quickly and in an effective manner and the Council should make it possible for United Nations missions to visit the country and present their reports. The current attitude of the Syrian authorities went against the eligibility criteria for the Council and France called upon Syria to withdraw its candidacy.

MARIUSZ LEWICKI (Poland), said that the response to human rights violations lay at the heart of the Human Rights Council's responsibility and they condemned the use of violence against peaceful demonstrators. Poland offered condolences to the Syrian families and they called for an immediate end to the use of violence and those responsible be brought to justice. They condemned the shooting of medical personnel and urged the Syrian authorities to respect the rights of civilians and the freedom of the press and they called on the Syrian government to introduce reforms, taking into account the aspirations of the Syrian people.

MARIA NAZARETH FARANI AZEVEDO (Brazil), said that recent events in the Arab world had taken the lives of innocent people. Brazil called on all Governments to support migrants and refugees according to the principles of human rights law. Brazil was concerned about the violence in Syria. The recent reforms, including the abolishment of the state of emergency, showed positive steps and Brazil highlighted the role of the Arab League in assisting Syria. Violent repression of political manifestation was occurring in other Arab countries and the Council should apply the same principles to all Member States.

MAURICIO MONTALVO (Ecuador), condemned all human rights violations in the world, regardless of the time and the place where they occurred and the Human Rights Council should always apply the principles of equity and non-selectivity. The Council must look at the grave and systematic violations of human rights. The respect of human rights and human dignity had to be universal and absolute, regardless of whether the authors were from rich or poor countries. The rich and the powerful were never worried by the court and Ecuador recalled the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the message delivered with this Declaration 60 years ago.

SEK WANNAMETHEE (Thailand), said it shared the concerns of the international community regarding the recent situation in Syria and wished to extend its deep condolences to the people of Syria. The actions today at the Human Rights Council should focus on the timeliness in the Council's response and also the spirit of non-politicization, cooperation and constructiveness as well as respect for national sovereignty. Thailand urged the Government of Syria to strictly adhere to its international human rights obligations in maintaining domestic peace and security and should immediately address the humanitarian situation of both the civilian and refugee populations. Thailand urged the use of political dialogue for a peaceful resolution and encouraged the Government of Syria to consider giving a voluntary update of its situation and investigation of human rights violations during the upcoming 17th Session of the Human Rights Council in order to show its transparency and willingness to prevent impunity.

LAURA DUPUY-LASERRE (Uruguay), said that the Human Rights Council had to be able to reject objectively human rights violations in the world regardless of where they occurred and they condemned the use of public forces against civilians including peaceful demonstrators. They could not accept unjustified restriction of freedom of expression and assembly, and the Council should seek national dialogue. They encouraged the Council to invite the High Commissioner and the thematic relevant special procedures to give technical support to ensure that everyone's human rights were respected.

PEDRO OYARCE (Chile), said that this Special Session would allow the Council to act objectively on human rights violations regardless of where they occurred in the world. The use of violence should always be condemned and the Council could not remain on the margin of what was occurring in Syria. Chile valued the reforms adopted by Syria, but said it was key that these reforms should be implemented as soon as possible. Chile said constructive dialogue was the only option to address citizens' demands and the Council must encourage the authorities to improve human rights in the field through technical assistance. Chile supported the follow up of a mechanism to investigate violations of human rights law and said it was important that the Office of the High Commissioner maintain contact with the Syrian Government.

XIA JINGGE (China), welcomed the moves taken by the Syrian government such as the call for national dialogue and the decision to investigate the recent events, and China hoped that the Council could maintain stability and restore order in the country. China supported the efforts by the countries in the region to find a solution and reduce tension and some countries had come up with some proposals and ideas, however, any solutions should be in accordance with the United Nations Charter and with the rules of international law and not interfere with the internal affairs of the country. Therefore, any help by the international community should ensure the maintenance of a normal social and economic life. The rights to peaceful assembly and freedom of speech must be guaranteed and exercised within the framework established by international law. Governments had to hear the legitimate demands of people and they had the duty to safeguard the dignity of law. China said that in view of the sharp difference of opinions within the Council in relation to the human rights situation in Syria, this session could

split the Council and undermine its credibility. They rejected any pressure tactics on human rights issues and the practice of “naming and shaming”.

RODOLFO REYES RODRIGUEZ (Cuba), said that it would like to speak out against the double standards in the Council and it did not believe that the alleged protection of human rights should be used as a pretext for intervention in internal affairs. The situation in Libya was an example of such interference. Why had the Council desired to condemn Syria; was it because the Council wanted to justify foreign interference in Syria? The Syrian Government had recognized the peoples’ demands and was ready to fulfill those demands. There should be a Special Session to discuss the actions of NATO and the United States in Afghanistan. The origin of the situation in the Middle East and North Africa was due to the policies of the United States government. Cuba said the problems in Syria should be resolved internally.

CARLOS RAMIRO MARTINEZ ALVARADO (Guatemala), said that the Council had to resolve all the serious human rights situations and they expressed concern in the face of the serious events happening in Syria. Guatemala called upon the Syrian authorities to fulfill their international obligations to protect civilians. It was important that human rights and fundamental freedoms be given pride of place by any State.

EILEEN CHAMBERLAIN DONAHOE (United States of America), said that the purpose of this Special Session of the Human Rights Council was to make clear that the international community strongly condemned the killing, arrest and torture of peaceful protestors taking place in Syria. Members of the Human Rights Council were gathered here today to express their outrage at the extreme violence used by the Syrian Government to silence their citizens’ universal rights to freedom of expression, peaceful assembly and participation in the affairs of their State. The Secretary-General and the High Commissioner for Human Rights and a group of ten United Nations Special Procedure mandate holders had called on the Syrian Government to stop the excessive use of force against peaceful protestors and called for investigations into and accountability for the abuses. Governments that turned guns on their own people should have no place in the Council chamber. The United States was strongly opposed to Syrian membership in the Human Rights Council and encouraged other members to oppose their candidacy.

BRANISLAV LYSAK (Slovakia), said that despite positive examples in the region, Slovakia regretted that Syria’s leadership opted for a different track. Families of the more than four hundred victims and the general public beaten in the streets looked carefully at this Council’s reaction to the recent developments in the country in accordance with its mandate. In this vein, Slovakia thanked the main sponsors for convening this Special Session, which Slovakia also subscribed to. While strongly condemning the way the Syrian authorities approached the peaceful protests, showing a pattern of gross and systematic human rights violations, Slovakia called on the Syrian Government to ensure an immediate end to killings and in general, any excessive use of force against its own population participating in peaceful protests and to engage in a genuine, transparent, inclusive dialogue towards the country’s democratic future.

MIKHAIL LEBEDEV (Russian Federation), said that it was concerned by the situation in Syria, but believed the Syrian authorities would carry out a comprehensive investigation and hold all those responsible accountable. Some of those protesting in Syria and other countries in the region showed they believed that by escalating the violence the international community would come to their rescue and that this would only lead to civil war. The Russian Federation said that the recent reforms by the Government in Syria would improve the situation of human rights and showed the authorities' determination to deal with the situation. The crisis must be resolved internally and there should be no imposition of ready made solutions or the taking of sides as this would threaten regional and global security. The General Assembly stressed the importance of non-selectivity and impartiality in creating the Human Rights Council and unfortunately the initiative of this Session violated these principles as they attempted to intervene in a sovereign State. The Russian Federation said it hoped the situation in Syria would be resolved through dialogue and non-intervention.

JUAN JOSE GOMEZ CAMACHO (Mexico), said that the world had to demonstrate maturity and support the societies through the framework provided by human rights standards, given the fact that the exercise of these rights stood at the foundation of society. With this conviction in mind, Mexico firmly condemned the use of violence to undermine these rights that were key components of any democratic society. The Council had to support the rights to freedom of assembly and association and stop the repression against demonstrators who were legitimately defending their rights. The population needed the full solidarity of the international community and Mexico called for the perpetrators to be brought to justice and for the Council not to be inhibited when it came to protecting human rights in the world. They were also concerned about the situation in Yemen and Bahrain and they called on these governments to respect human rights without restrictions.

KWON HAERYONG (Republic of Korea), said that a prompt and concerted response to urgent human rights situations was indeed the principal mandate of the Human Rights Council and it hoped that this Special Session would provide an opportunity for the international community to deliver a clear and unified message and prevent further human rights violations in Syria. The Government of the Republic of Korea urged the Syrian Government to immediately cease its use of force against peaceful protestors to prevent further casualties and a deterioration of the human rights situation on the ground. All States had the obligation to protect and promote human rights and fundamental freedoms, including the right to free expression and peaceful assembly. The Republic of Korea called on the Syrian Government to respect the legitimate democratic aspirations of its people and to protect and promote their fundamental human rights and freedoms.

ZAMIR AKRAM (Pakistan), on behalf of the Organization for the Islamic Conference, said that regarding the situation in Syria, the Secretary General of the Organization for the Islamic Conference conveyed to the Syrian government that it was following with deep concern the developments in Syria and expressed sorrow at the large number of deaths and injuries. The Secretary General reiterated the OIC's consistent stand in the favour of restraint and non-use of force, together with the need for early implementation of the reforms recently announced by the Syrian Government. The OIC welcomed the

Syrian leadership's determination for restoration of peace and stability in the country and its commitment to press ahead with the reform programme, including lifting the state of emergency.

IRUTHISHAM ADAM (Maldives), said that the bedrock of the Muslim awakening that was seen vividly across the Arab world was driven by popular protests and indicated that the peoples in these societies were eager for reform. The Maldives was deeply concerned at the ongoing human rights violations against the political protesters and called on the Government of Syria to immediately put an end to these violations and to enter into meaningful, transparent and inclusive dialogue as a way of ending violence and of strengthening human rights and freedoms in the country.

NAHIDA SOBHAN (Bangladesh), believed that the Council should be objective and impartial in responding to human rights situations and they believed in the importance of establishing peaceful dialogue with all parties concerned. Bangladesh viewed the recent reforms adopted by the Syrian government as positive steps, but many challenges still remained and they believed that the Syrian government would overcome these challenges.

KENICHI SUGANUMA (Japan), said it was concerned by the Syrian Government's use of force and violence against peaceful demonstrators which had led to the deaths and injuries of many civilians. Japan urged the Government of Syria to immediately provide all necessary support to those affected, including by granting access to humanitarian organizations. Japan urged the Syrian Government to hold meaningful dialogue with its people, swiftly implement the various political and economic reforms that they were demanding and restore the stability of the country. Japan requested that the High Commissioner for Human Rights submit a preliminary report to the 17th Session of the Council on the human rights situation in Syria.

OTHMAN HASHIM (Malaysia), said that freedom of peaceful assembly and association were key and fundamental characteristics of democratic societies and the exercise of those rights and freedoms had to be in line with prevailing laws and above all, should not be at the expense of other rights bearers. Like others, Malaysia too had been paying close attention to the developments unfolding in Syria. Their delegation noted that since January 2011 Syria continued to be rocked by turbulent and violent protests with little signs of it abating thus far. Malaysia believed that such positive efforts on the part of the Government needed to be further encouraged by the international community.

DANTE MARTINELLI (Switzerland), said that it was concerned with the attacks against peaceful demonstrators in countries of the Middle East and North Africa. Violence was not an answer to the legitimate demands of people, including the right to freedom of speech and assembly. Switzerland was especially concerned by the use of force by the security forces and welcomed the lifting of the State of Emergency, reforms to the Higher Court and the lifting of restrictions on the Kurdish people. Regarding violations of human rights, Switzerland had requested the establishment of an independent and impartial fact-finding mission and urged the Government of Syria to release political prisoners and to allow journalists to cover the crisis.

SANDRINE KOA WING (Mauritius), said that they were particularly disturbed by reports of cases where security forces were using live ammunition against peaceful protesters, resulting in civilian deaths. Therefore, Mauritius echoed the sentiments recently expressed by the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights who urged Syria to listen to the voices of its people and her calls for the release of all detained protesters and human rights defenders. In the same vein, they called on the Syrian authorities to order prompt and impartial investigations into the allegations of serious violations of human rights committed against protesters and detainees and to ensure that all those responsible were held accountable and brought to justice.

GEIR SJOBERG (Norway), said that it was the duty of the Council to react urgently to the grave and systematic breaches of human rights in Syria. Norway joined the call for an investigation into the deaths of innocent protestors and said that unlawful acts of violence should not go unpunished. Freedom of expression and assembly were preconditions for sustainable development and prosperity. Norway called for an immediate end to the violence and for steps to be taken to address the legitimate demands of the population. Norway said that the developments in Syria stood in stark contrast to the requirements of the Human Rights Council and were not compatible with Syria's bid for membership to the Council.

FRANCOIS ROUX (Belgium), conveyed their condolences to those who lost family members or friends as a result of the events that took place in the Syrian Arab Republic in the previous weeks and Belgium called upon the Syrian authorities to put an end to the violations conducted against peaceful demonstrators. These fundamental rights had to be respected and Belgium recalled that Syria had signed the Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. With regard to freedom of opinion, Belgium said that it involved not only the right to express ideas, but also the right to access to information and in this respect the right of freedom of the media was crucial. It was thanks to this freedom of expression that the international community could have a correct opinion on the Syrian situation and avoiding these rights was therefore counterproductive. The investigations of human rights violations in Syria would help the Council to identify those responsible and since General Assembly resolution 60/21 provided for the members of the Human Rights Council to respect the norms of human rights, Belgium exhorted the Syrian government to withdraw its candidacy.

CHEIKH AHMED OULD ZAHAF (Mauritania), said that it noted that those who asked for the convening of this Special Session had also said that Syria should do this and not that. This Council should be involved in a constructive dialogue with the Syrian Government.

For use of the information media; not an official record