



# Human Rights up Front

## An Overview

*“Human Rights up Front offers us a once-in-a-generation opportunity to help ensure the United Nations meets the aspirations of the Charter.”*

Ban Ki-moon, UN Secretary-General

## I. ORIGIN AND OBJECTIVES

The Secretary-General’s 2012 Internal Review Panel (IRP)<sup>1</sup> on UN action at the end of the war in Sri Lanka concluded there had been a “systemic failure” in meeting UN responsibilities to prevent and respond to serious violations of human rights and humanitarian law and to protect people at risk.

The Secretary-General called for action to address the lessons of the past, and to ensure the UN fully meets its prevention responsibilities in all countries. This led to the development of the Human Rights up Front (HRuF) Action Plan<sup>2</sup>. HRuF seeks three types of change:

- A **cultural change** through which HRuF: asks all staff to recognize human rights and protection of civilians as a core responsibility; asks staff to be principled and act with moral courage; ensures UNHQ backing for those who do; and, demands greater accountability for UN action.
- An **operational change**, in the field and at Headquarters, through which HRuF: requires the UN System to stay attuned to human rights violations that can signal worse to come; supports better early warning, shared analysis, and strategies; and ensures better coordination and better adapted capacity to respond.
- A **change to UN political engagement**, through which HRuF: encourages more proactive engagement with Member States to generate political support for early and preventive action.

### The IRP report found that

The UN system as a whole:

- did not react effectively to early warning;
- lacked a shared understanding of the situation and a common sense of UN responsibilities;
- did not engage with national authorities and Member States in a way that built political support necessary for prevention;
- did not act in accordance with the principles and mandates defined in the Charter and Member State resolutions.
- UNHQ saw duplication and gaps, inadequate coordination and insufficient support to the field.

HRuF is led by the Secretary-General, and its implementation is overseen by the Deputy Secretary-General. HRuF directly concerns the UN’s human rights, development, humanitarian and political work, in all countries. All UN entities and staff (in HQ and the field) have a role in implementing it.

<sup>1</sup> Web link: [The Internal Review Panel report on Sri Lanka](#)

<sup>2</sup> Web link: [Human Rights up Front Action Plan](#)

In November 2013, the Secretary-General issued a statement<sup>3</sup> to all UN staff renewing, on behalf of all staff, the Organization’s commitment to uphold the responsibilities assigned by the Charter and Member States whenever there is a threat of serious and large scale violations of human rights or humanitarian law.

*“It is irrefutable that serious human rights violations are the best early warning of impending atrocities.[...] If we fail to act early, then the human, political and economic costs are significantly greater. This calls for a more flexible and better coordinated UN System, both on the ground and at Headquarters. This is what the Rights up Front initiative aims to accomplish.”*

Jan Eliasson, Deputy UN Secretary-General

In April 2015, the Secretary-General wrote to the Principals of every entity in the UN System reissuing his statement and stating that HRuF offers a once-in-a-generation opportunity to help ensure that the UN meets the aspirations of the Charter, and asking for their full support in taking steps to internalize and implement it within their respective entities.

## II. HRuF IN PRACTICE

HRuF applies in all places, to different extents depending on a situation’s complexity. HRuF is light, concise, and does not add layers to UN action. It enables the UN to better meet its responsibilities.

<b>Country situation:</b>	All situations	Evolving	Complex
<b>Response mechanism:</b>	Country level	Regional Quarterly Review together with country level	Senior Action Group together with country level

### 1. Country level response

The senior UN official – the Special Representative of the Secretary-General (SRSG) in missions, or the Resident Coordinator (RC) in other settings<sup>4</sup> (or UNHQ if no country presence) - has lead country level responsibility for implementing HRuF and will be held accountable through existing performance assessment tools for fulfilling this responsibility.

- **Common country-level analysis:** In every country, the UN should use periodic analysis of risk factors to stay attuned to the human rights situation and the risk of serious violations. UN peace operations usually have analysis tools, while UNCTs may need to supplement existing practice, supported by OHCHR’s country analysis<sup>5</sup> and the HRBA analysis tool.
- **Adjust programming and advocacy:** Where analysis identifies concerns, the UN presence, led by RCs (or RC/HCs) or SRSGs, should address them through discussions among UNCT members and mission components, and changes to advocacy, activities, and programming (e.g. UNDAFs, Strategic Response Plans, protection of civilians strategies or Integrated Strategic Frameworks). Concerns should be raised with national authorities and other relevant parties, and decisions made on which UN entity will deliver messages (informed by political sensitivities, mandates and security), and on consistency between UN entities.

<sup>3</sup> Web link: [SG commitment letter to all staff](#)

<sup>4</sup> See [Annex-1](#) for guidance to senior officials

<sup>5</sup> The HRuF Action Plan calls on OHCHR to regularly share with all UNCTs a summary analysis of principal human rights concerns and risks of serious violations.

- **Development of country-level strategy:** When risks require a different UN response (beyond edits to existing programming), then HRuF calls for the UN presence to develop a brief strategy: missions can fine-tune existing strategies or take additional measures; in non-mission settings, the RC should lead development of a strategy with the UNCT. The strategy should not duplicate existing strategies, such as human rights mainstreaming or protection of civilians strategies. Instead it should: reflect an understanding of the overall country situation; identify human rights concerns affecting the UN’s core goals; identify priorities; and align the UN’s various entities accordingly.

## 2. Regional Quarterly Review

The Regional Quarterly Review (RQR) is a mechanism through which representatives of UN system regional divisions at UNHQ scan all countries in their region every three months for early warning signs (developmental, political, humanitarian, or explicitly human rights) and then discuss in more detail those situations that are “evolving” and can presage the risk of serious violations and crisis. Where there is a UN country presence, the senior UN official is consulted by the RQR co-chairs (DPA and Regional UNDG) on the situation. The focus of the RQR is primarily on UNCT only presences; although mission settings may also benefit from a review if this does not duplicate other processes, such as ITFs. The RQRs are used by both UNHQ and country level senior leaders for: early warning; to ensure UN system-wide analysis of a changing situation; to align and coordinate UNHQ entities with each other and with the field; to support RCs or SRSGs by bringing a situation that, due to its complexity (e.g. regional, political, security or other) requires the attention of the whole of UNHQ; to identify operational support needs in the field; to solicit advocacy support from the most senior UNHQ officials.

## 3. Senior Action Group

For the most serious, urgent or complex situations, the Deputy Secretary-General convenes the Senior Action Group (SAG) – comprised of the Principals of UN entities. SRSGs and RCs are consulted via their reporting lines. The SAG decides on common analysis, priorities and strategy. The SAG outcomes help reposition the UN - analytically, politically and operationally to address a situation. Both country and UNHQ leadership have found SAGs extremely useful in rapidly aligning the whole UN System around a clear strategy in fast changing and deteriorating situations. SAGs have: helped resolve internal differences of analysis and potentially competing objectives within the UN System; led to changed messaging and fast engagement by the Secretary-General with the Security Council in support of an RC; led to re-tasking of field presences; ensured more direct responsibility of UN Principals for UN action.

*“I want UN staff to know that when they stick their necks out; when they give those early warning signals; when they show courage; they should always be recognized, even rewarded, and we will back them up fully. This is an assurance that the Secretary-General and I give.”*

Jan Eliasson, Deputy Secretary-General

### Support to implement HRuF

In brief, the first step to implement HRuF is to analyse and understand a given situation. Depending on the outcome of the analysis, UN staff can then apply HRuF at the country level only, or through the RQR or the SAG. There is simple guidance for analysis, strategy and the outcomes of RQR and SAG meetings. Existing tools also support HRuF implementation in the field. For instance, fast access to the Secretary-General’s advocacy; temporary or longer-term deployments of Peace and Development Advisers, Human Rights Advisers, Protection Officers, and experts in mediation and conflict prevention (see [Annex-2](#) and [Annex-3](#) for more information on support available).

### III. FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS ABOUT HRuF

**How is HRuF different from human rights mainstreaming?** HRuF is not a human rights mainstreaming tool or a human rights mechanism. Instead, HRuF is a tool to bring the UN system together around a common understanding of risks and UN responsibilities, and a strategy for action.

**Where and when does HRuF apply?** HRuF is an approach that the UN should apply in all countries and contexts. Its initial focus is on prevention, long before serious violations occur. And if situations deteriorate, it provides a guide and a standard for UN action.

**How can the HRuF approach be used in traditional development settings?** Certain human rights violations – including economic, social and cultural rights – can be a clear indicator of a wider pattern of serious violations. Marginalization and exclusion are often the first warning signs of worse to come. By staying attuned to these issues in all settings, a UNCT can identify concerns at an earlier stage and use HRuF to get early support from the wider UN system to address the situation effectively.

**How can HRuF help the UN be better coordinated and operate as One UN?** Through HRuF, an RC or SRSG can quickly seek coordinated support from UNHQ toward common analysis and decisions to build greater political support and operational capacity. HRuF ensures that UN field presences can share the responsibility for action with UNHQ, and that UNHQ is ultimately accountable in the most complex situations. It also ensures each UN entity implements its mandate with an awareness of, and support for, the overall actions needed to address serious violations. By activating the entire system in a coordinated manner, HRuF positions the UN to respond early and more effectively.

**Will staff be backed when taking a principled stance?** Through a combination of reframing UN understanding of its responsibilities, common analysis of situations, and accountability of staff at all levels, HRuF is creating an environment in which staff are encouraged and supported to take positions that are consistent with the UN Charter and human rights and protection responsibilities. The Secretary-General, the Deputy Secretary-General and other UN Principals have underlined that they will back UN staff who take principled actions, whether in the most serious situations or in much earlier work for prevention.

**How does HRuF impact the UN's engagement with national actors?** HRuF requires the UN to raise concerns on which the Organization cannot remain silent. However, the end goal is to strengthen engagement and consultation with national actors and to support them in addressing these concerns. HRuF helps the UN to effectively manage action on politically sensitive issues, while ensuring that the issues are not dropped and that the UN continues to support State actors.

**How is HRuF addressing the issue of staff security?** In keeping with findings of the IRP (see recommendations F and C6, as well as p. 48-53), HRuF requires that the safety and security context affecting staff in the field be fully understood, in the light of the situation and UN responsibilities. It calls for steps to ensure the protection of national and international staff, while still ensuring an effective UN response, including through the Programme Criticality Framework<sup>6</sup>.

**Next steps:** The Secretary-General has asked all Principals to translate HRuF into action for their staff at HQ and country levels. As of 2015, all senior UN officials will be assessed through their annual performance appraisal system on their HRuF responsibilities. All UNCT, UN mission or UN department, agency, fund or programme should start applying the HRuF approach to their work and can request a discussion with the HRuF team in the Executive Office of the Secretary-General ([rightsupfront@un.org](mailto:rightsupfront@un.org)).

*“The success of Human Rights up Front will depend on all staff members making its objectives their own. They should apply the initiative in a spirit that goes beyond the interests of their individual units and departments, to embrace the interests of the United Nations as a whole.”*

Ban Ki-moon, UN Secretary-General

<sup>6</sup> Web link: [Programme Criticality Framework](#)