
*Closing ceremony of the Nelson Mandela World
Human Rights Moot Court Competition*

*Statement by United Nations High Commissioner
for Human Rights, Michelle Bachelet.*

Friday 16 July 2021

Mr. Eduardo Kapapelo

Excellencies,

Dear participants,

It is a pleasure to greet you today.

Congratulations for reaching the final round of this year's Nelson Mandela World Human Rights Moot Court.

I want to thank and celebrate all of you who joined this competition, for your much needed interest and dedication to human rights.

You are part of an inspiring generation.

We are seeing powerful demonstrations of the commitment of young people to the human rights of all and the health of the planet.

Countless times, they – you -- have been successful in influencing debates of national and international importance and prompting social change in many different ways.

That provides us with a glimpse of the huge potential youth advocacy and activism that can be a force for good -- and power to drive transformative change.

It gives me reason to hope.

You are beginning your careers at a delicate time.

I want to express my respect to you for maintaining your resolve while managing these long pandemic months of physical distancing in your schools and universities.

And you have done it in a context of deep global suffering. COVID-19, which has claimed over 4 million lives; rising poverty, hunger and inequality; protests about harsh and systemic racism in many societies; and the looming threat of climate change.

The pandemic has set off a cascade of human rights disasters, of a scope and magnitude that we have rarely seen -- injustice, inequalities and widespread discrimination of every type. It is reversing progress achieved in many countries and regions and **pushing millions more people even further behind.**

But every major crisis is an opening for transformative change. **COVID-19 has laid bare the unbearable cost of neglecting human rights.** The pandemic has broadly highlighted where changes need to be made and what those changes need to be.

Our efforts must be based on human rights. And for that, we need the law – and, therefore, you, future practitioners of law around the world.

Dear students,

We stand now at a crossroads.

We can continue denying the scientific facts that “we are all in this together” and that “no one is safe until we are all safe” and risk a never-ending pandemic. And here I mean both COVID-19 and the pandemic of inequalities it has unquestionably exposed.

Let me explain. The profound unfairness of unequal access to vaccines pose a threat to everyone, as mutating forms of the virus that may emerge among largely unvaccinated populations.

At the same time, the economic consequences of vaccine failure are profound but, in some countries, we already see the benefits that widespread vaccination can have. So, we are looking at growing prospect of vastly divergent recoveries, exacerbated by underlying failures to invest in human rights-based protections.

We can continue to get back to a so-called normal – even though normal is what brought us to where we are today.

Or, dear students, or... we could remember what our eyes have seen and learn the lessons of this crisis in order to recover better. To rebuild in solidarity and

ways that correct dysfunctional systems and norms, and lead to better policies and more cohesive, more resilient societies.

I trust you will agree with me that, in fact, both morally and practically the choice the only one.

It is very easy to say, right? But, believe me, it is also possible to do. We already have a vaccine against injustice, poverty, inequality, conflict, underdevelopment, and environmental catastrophe. It is a vaccine made up of measures we developed after previous global shocks, including two World Wars, a pandemic and financial crises.

This vaccine is called human rights.

And, here, dear students. I look to you.

The challenges before us are multiple and complex. Economic recovery. Social justice, racial justice, gender justice and inequalities. Digital rights. Shrinking civic space. Climate change.

As your careers develop, I encourage you to remain determined and true to the ideals you are now learning. The law can be a powerful tool in the hands of all looking to make our world more just.

The great body of international human rights treaties, laws and recommendations constitutes extremely practical and focused guidance to shape effective policy to prevent and address crises. Human rights norms constitute a tested and immediately actionable body of guidance for us to rebuild.

There are many challenges to the full realization of human rights. Some relate to States' resources, or legal

and constitutional traditions; many involve a deficit in political will. In light of what we have experienced and learned from COVID-19, we need a very extensive rebuilding of many national and global systems, practices, policies and even institutions.

You can have a significant role in engaging with these issues, so that people's lives can be improved.

Dear students,

The need for solidarity is an important lesson of this crisis. As is the protective value of human rights-based policies. But, above all else, the pandemic has shown us how interconnected we are.

We are bound together by human needs – to food, to health care and to the knowledge that our loved ones are safe. Human longings – for justice, dignity and a life free of discrimination. Human rights.

These are also our human commitments to each other and the generations that will follow us.

I invite you to join the Secretary-General's call for a "New Social Contract and a New Global Deal that create equal opportunities for all and respect the rights and freedoms of all."

And I also invite you to draw inspiration further encouragement from Nelson Mandela, whose vision is inspiration for this Moot Court Competition.

In a speech addressing the AIDS pandemic in 2005, Nelson Mandela asked:

"When the history of our times is written, will we be remembered as the generation that turned our backs in a moment of global crisis or will it be recorded that we did the right thing?"

We know the path we need to take. And will take it
hand in hand.

Thank you for standing up for human rights.