I thank the United States presidency for convening this important meeting.

We are all aware that large-scale human rights violations cause terrible suffering and undermine prospects for sustainable peace and reconciliation. Healing these wounds is always a difficult and painful process. Yet that responsibility grows with each new instance of mass killings, displacement, and sexual violence.

Prevention is an essential means of reducing human suffering, building stable and prosperous societies, and enabling people to reach their full potential.

And upholding human rights is a crucial element in prevention.

International cooperation for prevention, and particularly for translating early warning into early action, depends on trust between Member States, and in their relations with the United Nations.

The Security Council has a major role to play. Article 24 of the Charter is clear: the primary responsibility for the maintenance of international peace and security rests with this Council “in order to ensure prompt and effective action”.

I address the Council in that spirit.

The issue today is not that human rights violations undermine every aspect of our shared values and common work, but rather how the United Nations responds.

I would like to underline three points to help frame this discussion.

First, peace must be relentlessly pursued along the continuum of prevention, conflict resolution and peacekeeping to peacebuilding and long-term development.

Peace takes constant effort, and all UN institutions and bodies must work together within their respective mandates and responsibilities.

Second, peace, security, sustainable development and human rights are mutually reinforcing.

The Charter of the United Nations – which we are all here to uphold – has been fundamental in linking those three pillars.

When the UN system has tried to implement them separately, we have often failed to achieve the objectives set by Member States and we have failed people. Several reform processes have identified fragmentation as a major weakness.
We must collectively draw strength from the letter and spirit of Charter to better prevent armed conflict and sustain peace through development. This means ensuring the effective protection of all human rights -- civil, political, economic, social and cultural.

Third, a coherent and streamlined approach to human rights within the UN system is critical. Member States have the primary responsibility to integrate the promotion and protection of human rights in their national policies.

But close cooperation between the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights and all relevant United Nations bodies, including the Security Council, enhances general awareness of potential crisis situations, and our collective ability to address them.

The Secretariat is entrusted by Member States to present the right information and options, respecting mandates and political independence. I stand ready to foster a more trusting relationship and to improve communications with the Council, with consistency, candour and transparency.

Human rights concerns are intrinsic to maintaining peace and security and essential to informing Security Council deliberations and decision-making.

The unity of this Council in effectively addressing the most blatant violations of human rights -- and in particular averting mass atrocities -- is crucial.

I once again call upon this Council to spare no effort to put an end to the intolerable suffering of the Syrian people. The failure to do so is a tragedy that shames us all.

There is growing awareness of the ways in which rights violations signal threats to security and how rights upheld can contribute to peace. Recent experience offers many examples.

UN peace operations have been progressively authorized with robust human rights and protection of civilians mandates.

Indeed, 15 Security Council-mandated peace operations include a human rights element.

Systematic monitoring and reporting of human rights violations has given a voice to victims and advanced the fight against impunity.

Moreover, these efforts offer important warning signals to societies that also highlight the Council’s determination to prevent further abuses. To advance this work, I encourage close cooperation with my Special Adviser on the Prevention of Genocide.

Human rights work contributes to missions’ efforts to protect civilians under threat, and the missions’ engagement with host states on human rights issues has helped build capacities and even in some circumstances preserve democratic space.

This Council has also taken decisive action to prosecute alleged perpetrators of the most brutal crimes -- by establishing international criminal tribunals for Rwanda, the former Yugoslavia, and elsewhere -- and by referring cases to the International Criminal Court. Accountability for such crimes is an important element in achieving reconciliation, and over the longer term building resilient societies and judicial institutions.

Other key initiatives of this Council include advancing the protection of children in armed conflict and action against sexual-based violence in armed conflict. The Council has also put the human rights of women and children high on its agenda, as a valuable input to its peace efforts.

I remain deeply committed to this agenda, and will spare no efforts to step up the work and support of the Secretariat.
Protecting young generations from conflict situations is one of the best investments we can make to achieving sustainable peace.

Despite all these efforts, millions of people still need to be protected from crises. And far more time and resources continue to be spent responding to crises rather than preventing them.

If we are to truly address today’s challenges, we must make prevention our priority, tackle the root causes of conflict, help build and strengthen institutions, and react earlier and more effectively to address human rights concerns.

That is the lesson of so many conflicts. That is why I will remain staunchly committed to this agenda.

Our world is facing unprecedented peace and security challenges that result from a lack of prevention, and from insufficient implementation of human rights obligations, including social and economic rights.

The consequences for people and States, and indeed for humanity, are being felt by tens of millions and by entire regions.

Ensuring improved, and less politicised, action on human rights is a critical part of meeting this challenge, as is achieving urgent progress on the Sustainable Development Goals.

Allow me to suggest a theoretical test: if the most acute human rights and development concerns were immediately resolved, how many situations would still be threats to peace and security and remain on the Council’s agenda?

I have set in motion various reforms of the Secretariat that will enable us to play our role better, in keeping with the mandates and trust the Member States place in us. The resolutions on sustaining peace and the 2030 Agenda are cause for hope; progress on human rights aspects would further complement these advances.

In the months to come, I hope Member States will engage through the General Assembly and the Security Council to support my reform proposals and strengthen them with your own.

Thank you very much.