The Human Rights Council (the Council) on Wednesday 3 March finished its 'high-level segment' during which State dignitaries addressed the Council. The High Commissioner for Human Rights called on the Council and its members to refocus on its mandate to address all human rights violations wherever they occur, and strengthen the promotion and protection of human rights. Many dignitaries commented on the upcoming review of the Council's work and functioning in 2011.

The High Commissioner set the scene for the discussion of the review by reminding the Council of the strong mandate it has been given by the General Assembly. She stated that the Council should improve its fulfillment of this mandate by focusing more on chronic human rights conditions, improving the coordination of human rights mechanisms, supporting real change 'on the ground', and ensuring sufficient resources for its work.

Most States commented favourably on the Council's work so far, with particular praise for the universal periodic review (UPR). Several concrete proposals were made, many of which had been discussed during the Council's first year. Although the review process in the Council will only commence after its 14th session in June this year, some States are starting to publicly set out their priorities and positions regarding the review.

Among the specific proposals made were the following:

- Echoing the High Commissioner, some States highlighted the need to base the review on a proper assessment of the Council's work (Romania).
- Many States seemed to think that Council's institutional framework is adequate, and that it could do better if all States would 'engage with more resolve' (Bangladesh) and that the 'heart of the problem is not institutional, but political' (Cyprus). Thailand, Ireland and Luxembourg identified the main objective and challenge as being how to enhance the Council's impact on the ground.
- Spain (on behalf of the EU) felt that the Council could gain greater efficiency by strengthening the role of the Presidency. Discussions in the General Assembly on this topic have so far failed, as the resolutions recommending the establishment an office of the President were not endorsed. In the Council, States have sought to limit the substantive role of the President, including when opposing the proposal of former President Ambassador Uhomoibhi of Nigeria for a thematic panel discussion on the protection of civilians in armed conflict.
- Some States highlighted that the Council should not divert its attention from the prevention of violations and the protection of victims while engaging in the review of its work and functioning. (Algeria).
- In relation to the UPR, several States Stressed the need to avoid duplication of its work with that of the treaty bodies (Croatia, Bahrain).
- Also in the context of the review, the US criticised the Council's focus on Israel, which it felt was disproportionate.
- South Africa brought up the controversial idea of establishing an 'ethics committee' of independent experts to oversee implementation of the code of conduct of special procedures mandate holders. Sri Lanka also of the need for an 'effective and objective' mechanism to ensure observance of the Code of Conduct.
- South Africa wanted the review to include the relationship of the Council with the General Assembly's Third Committee.
- South Africa also encouraged the Council to improve its accessibility for victims of human rights violations, including NGOs from the 'global south'.
- Switzerland proposed to streamline the adoption of resolutions, including through examining the complementarity between the Council and the Third Committee.
• The Council’s capacity to address situations of human rights violations, as mentioned by the High Commissioner, was commented upon by many States, including through expression of concern at the elimination or weakening of country specific special procedures (US) and support for the renewal of existing country mandates (Slovenia). Germany suggested the appointment of an independent expert on each country in the world.

• Several States addressed the relationship of the Council to the OHCHR. South Africa called for a ‘proper realignment’ of that relationship, while Norway, Luxembourg and Bulgaria congratulated the High Commissioner for her valuable input in the strengthening of the human rights system, and stressed the value of the High Commissioner’s independent role.

• The Czech Republic addressed the question of membership of the Council, saying that criteria for membership are currently not strict enough, and the need for more systematic follow-up to pledges made by States when presenting their candidatures.

In other developments, the Council decided to postpone the discussion of the joint study by four special procedures on secret detention. The report received significant opposition, in particular from the African Group and the Organisation of the Islamic Conference. The compromise is important in that it recognises the legitimacy of the special procedures’ initiative in drafting the report.