



THE UN & YOU

By Teresa Kotturan SCN – September 2018

Michelle Bachelet of Chile, the New UN High Commissioner for Human Rights



As the world marks the 70th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Michelle Bachelet of Chile has been appointed as the High Commissioner for Human Rights. She has joined the ranks of other illustrious women High Commissioners – Mary Robinson of Ireland, Louise Arbour of Canada and Navanetham Pillay of South Africa. She will replace Mr.

Zeid Ra’ad al-Hussein of Jordan, who did not seek a second term.

The office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights was established by the UN General Assembly in December 1993, following the 1993 World Conference on Human Rights. The High Commissioner is the ‘principal official who speaks out for human rights across the whole system,

strengthening human rights mechanisms; enhancing equality; fighting discrimination in all its forms; strengthening accountability and the rule of law; widening the democratic space and protecting the most vulnerable from all forms of human rights abuse.'

Michelle Bachelet is a former president of Chile, first woman to serve in that capacity in Chile. She was also the first executive director of UN Women from 2010 – 2013. Currently she is the chair of the board of the World Health Organization's Partnership for Maternal, Newborn and Child Health and a member of the UN high-level mediation board. Secretary General Antonio Guterres described her "as a pioneer, a visionary and a woman of principle, and a great human rights leader for these troubled times." Yes, "she will be taking up the world's most difficult jobs at a moment when Human Rights are under widespread attack," says Kenneth Roth of Human Rights Watch. The Secretary General also stated that at a time when "hatred and inequality are on the rise, it was vital to have a strong advocate for all human rights."

She lived under the turmoil and struggles of dictatorship; she suffered imprisonment and torture, which compelled her to flee into exile. She has been a victim of human rights abuses and as a physician, has witnessed the sufferings of people first hand. These deeply personal experiences have led her to make the rights of women a priority and introduced social, political and educational reforms when she became the president of Chile in 2006 and again in 2014. While in office, she increased

corporate taxes and eliminated loopholes enjoyed by the rich. Her life journey has prepared her for the role of the high commissioner for human rights. She will have ample opportunities to advocate for the rights of the people against their governments. According to Mary Robinson, UN High Commissioner's "office is one that has to always speak truth to power."

Michelle Bachelet has received support from most of the countries around the world, in spite of the criticism of the Human Rights Council by countries like the United States and Israel about its functioning. The Human Rights Council, in the past has failed to address the human rights abuses by a number of countries – Iran, Saudi Arabia, North Korea, Democratic Republic of Congo, Venezuela, Cuba, Nicaragua and many others. She brings her leadership and negotiating skills to her new calling and will require our prayers for her – to have the moral courage to stand up for the rights of all people, especially the most vulnerable of our society.

This is what she had to say as she took up her new job on September first in Geneva: "It is an honor to become the High Commissioner for Human Rights; I see it as an important job at the international level. The mandate to protect and promote human rights for everyone everywhere is daunting, but it is vital. I understand the victims and offenders of human rights are looking at me to ensure their rights and I am ready for the challenge. Like my predecessor I will do my utmost to make the Declaration of Human Rights a reality for everyone."