

*[Check against delivery]*



**Statement by  
CLAUDE HELLER**

**ACTING CHAIR**

**COMMITTEE AGAINST TORTURE**

76th session of the General Assembly  
Third Committee

Agenda item 71: Promotion and protection of human rights

a) Implementation of human rights instruments

12 October 2021  
New York



**Chairperson,**  
**Distinguished delegates**  
**Colleagues and friends**

We are today meeting again under exceptional circumstances via this virtual presentation and interactive dialogue.

As reflected in the annual report of the Committee against Torture and since then, given the global coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic and its variants, the continuing travel restrictions in some parts of the world and the related impossibility to hold in-person sessions of Committees in Geneva and New York, the Committee against Torture had to cancel its April-May 2020 and November-December 2020 sessions. It held a 1-day online session on 13 July 2020, a 3-day online session in April 2021 and a 3-week session in July 2021.

Despite major challenges, HoHH the Committee against Torture has continued to perform key activities: the Committee's Rapporteur on new complaints and interim measures has registered new cases and issued interim measures of protection, the Committee's Rapporteurs for follow-up under article 19 and 22 as well as the Rapporteur on reprisals have continued their activities. The Committee has also discussed and adopted its Lists of Issues and Lists of Issues Prior Reporting. And the Working Group on Individual Communications held its work online. Finally, the Committee took decisions on requests for confidential inquiries under article 20 of the Convention against Torture.

Obviously, this is not enough as our mandated activities such as country reviews and the discussion and adoption of individual complaints could not be carried out for a too long period since the outbreak of Covid 19.

For this reason, at its April 2021 session, the Committee decided to undertake an online focused country review of Belgium at its July 2021 session. It should be stressed that since the beginning of the pandemic, Belgium had announced at the Human Rights Council session that it volunteered for online country reviews including with CAT. The Committee would like to underline that the online country review with Belgium did not create a precedent for future reviews during in-situ sessions, that it is based on the principle that States should volunteer and not be imposed an online review and finally that this decision has been taken on an exceptional basis bearing in mind the pandemic. In addition to being the Committee's first online review since the pandemic, it was also the first-ever focused country review limited to five priority thematic issues the Committee had selected beforehand. The Committee valued

the focused review as an efficient way to address the most pressing priority issues, a methodology that could be used for future country reviews.

At its July 2021 session, the Committee gave priority to the examination and decisions online on the merits of individual complaints since the backlog had increased and additional meeting had been provided to CAT to address it. The Committee took decisions on 37 cases: 22 decisions on the merits – 6 violations and 16 non-violations -, two inadmissibility decisions and 13 discontinuances.

The Committee resumed its plenary discussions and decisions on follow-up to Concluding Observations and decisions on individual complaints as well as reprisals. On reprisals, the Committee Rapporteur highlighted that the absence of cases of reprisals may actually reveal a lack of access by victims to international and national mechanisms as well as lawyers due to Covid 19 and its consequences.

Furthermore, outside sessions, I have been actively engaged in meeting with the Chairs of other Treaty Bodies and in the treaty body strengthening process and the 2020 Treaty Body Review.

On 25 June 2021, as a part of our cooperation with United Nations anti-torture mechanisms, together with the Subcommittee on Prevention of Torture, the Special Rapporteur on Torture and the Board of Trustees of the United Nations Voluntary Fund for Victims of Torture, I participated to a Webinar online to commemorate the International Day in Support of Victims of Torture and the 40th Anniversary of the United Nations Voluntary Fund for Victims of Torture. The event was co-organized by the American University, Washington College of Law, Center for Human Rights and Humanitarian Law, the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) and the 4 United Nations anti-torture mechanisms. It addressed the thematic priority issue of fostering civic space to obtain redress and accountability for victims of torture.

And all Committee members spared no efforts to attend many online events in relation with the Convention against Torture.

All the activities I referred to, have been carried out in an extremely challenging environment while at the same time, the pandemic increased the backlog of individual complaints and created a new backlog of States reports to be reviewed.

In that context, let me echo the serious concerns expressed by the High Commissioner for Human Rights in her letter of 25 March 2021 to States on the fact that the General Assembly did not approve an increase in requested staff resources in 2020. The 10 treaty bodies definitely need increased resources from the United Nations General Assembly to fully perform their mandate since the whole treaty body system is at stake and not only the Committee against Torture.

To conclude, let me pay tribute to the goodwill, cooperation and commitment of many States parties, which enable the Committee against Torture to ensure that the Convention against Torture remains a unique treaty with a direct impact in the field and for the protection and redress of victims.

Let me thank also all those major key actors in the implementation of the Convention against Torture, namely the Convention against Torture Initiative (CTI), a State led initiative for the full ratification of the Convention and its implementation; National Human Rights Institutions, National Preventive Mechanisms and NGOs, particularly the World Organization Against Torture (OMCT) coordinating NGOs inputs to CAT work as well as the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights.

I thank you for your attention.

---