



EUROPEAN COURT OF HUMAN RIGHTS
COUR EUROPÉENNE DES DROITS DE L'HOMME

Conference on Human Rights for the Planet

Opening remarks by Robert Spano President of the European Court of Human Rights

Strasbourg, 5 October 2020

Madame Secretary General,
UN High Commissioner for Human Rights,
President of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe,
Ambassadors,
Distinguished colleagues and guests,

It is my great pleasure and honour to welcome you all to the European Court of Human Rights for this highly topical and important conference.

Some of you are here with us in Strasbourg and others further afield. Indeed, even before the COVID-19 crisis began, it had been intended that overseas speakers would make their presentations via live webcam in order to reduce their carbon footprint.

At the beginning of the year this type of “hybrid” event would have seemed a little unusual to say the least. Now of course, we have all grown quite accustomed to engaging in virtual debates with colleagues thousands of kilometers away. There are, after all, some advantages to the turbulent period we are all living through.

As you are aware, this conference was due to take place in April this year under the Georgian presidency of the Committee of Ministers. It now takes place in October under the Greek presidency. Let me thank wholeheartedly the Georgian authorities who made environmental issues a priority theme of their presidency and who organized the high-level conference on environmental protection and human rights in February this year. I would also like to thank warmly the Greek presidency which has kindly agreed to hold this event now.

Indeed, the outgoing Georgian presidency, the then incoming Greek and German presidencies showed their strong commitment to environmental issues through a joint declaration in May this year. The declaration called upon the Committee of Ministers to invite its Steering Committee for Human Rights (CDDH) to elaborate a draft non-binding instrument on human rights and the environment for the possible adoption by the Committee of Ministers at the latest by the end of next year.

All three States acknowledged the growing threats to the climate and the environment and the urgent need to act in an ambitious and concerted manner at the global level to better ensure their sustainability and protection.

Dear Guests,

Whatever one's views on the legal issues implicated by the environmental challenges we are facing, which will be explored in-depth today, it is clear that we are dealing with matters of planetary importance. We are pleased to welcome renowned academics and legal experts in the field of environmental law and climate change as well as Judges of our Court. The conference's focus is not just on the relationship between human rights and the environment, but also on what should be the role of domestic and International courts, including the European Court of Human Rights, in this field.

I mentioned the COVID-19 pandemic at the beginning of these opening remarks and I would like to demonstrate a certain symbiotic relationship which the health crisis has with the climate emergency we are facing. The pandemic we are fighting and climate change have an important element in common when it comes to the development of law and policy which bears emphasising.

Both phenomena bring us back to first principles, to a renewed and stark understanding that whatever our differences, we are, all of us, at our core the same, human beings that inhabit this planet together. Both are existential crises that impact us all. The pandemic does not discriminate between peoples and respect geographical boundaries. In the same way, climate change affects everyone of us and will impact the future of all humanity. I hope that today's conference will contribute meaningfully to the on-going global conversation which is required to address these challenges for the good of mankind.

Dear Guests,

I am now delighted to hand over the floor to former President, my good friend Judge Sicilianos, for his own words of welcome. Thank you and enjoy the conference.