



## Statement by H.E. Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs and Cooperation at the Opening session

- Deputy Secretary General of the Council of Europe, Bjorn Berge,
- Vice-President of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, dear Edite Estrela,
- Chair of the Executive Committee of the North-South Centre, Ambassador Camilleri-Vettiger,
- Deputy Registrar of the European Court of Human Rights, Abel Campos,
- Ismaili Imamat's Representative in Portugal, Ambassador Nazim Ahmad,
- Distinguished guests and participants, very good morning to all,

Allow me to start with a word of gratitude to the Ismaili Centre for hosting us today.

Portugal is a staunch supporter of freedom of religion or belief and a true believer in the importance of dialogue among civilizations, mutual understanding and the development of partnerships.

We are proud to have the Ismaili Centre in Portugal, as well as other organizations which promote these same values.

One of them is precisely the North-South Centre of the Council of Europe, created 33 years ago and based here in Lisbon.

As on the first day, Portugal remains strongly committed to the North-South Centre.

It continues to play a very relevant role in promoting dialogue, partnerships and solidarity between the global North and the global South, in particular between the shores of the Mediterranean, enabling us to tackle global challenges together.

We are enthusiastic about the potential that will be enabled from the synergies between the Centre and the South Programme.

We are looking forward to adding our cooperation in order to achieve ambitious results and consolidate and amplify the Centre's membership.

We are convinced that the North-South Centre can play a strong role in the strengthening of the Council of Europe's external dimension.

This can be achieved by developing effective partnerships between North and South, as recently reiterated at the 4th Summit of Heads of State and Government.

Ladies and gentlemen,

I would like to take a minute to refer to the ongoing situation in Israel and Gaza, which is a cause of great concern to all of us gathered in this room.

While we did not hesitate to condemn Hamas' terrorist actions, we are also the ones who can not hesitate, not even for one second, to say that Israel has every right to defend itself, including through military action against Hamas.

Notwithstanding, the Palestinian civilian populations must be respected and protected.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Before moving to the very important topic of today's Forum, allow me to underline the importance Portugal attaches to the Council of Europe.

This Organization has played a very crucial role in the consolidation of democracy and in the strengthening of the rule of law in our country since our accession back in 1976.

It remains the reference body and core political community in our continent for the promotion of human rights, democracy and the rule of law.

This has been unanimously reaffirmed by all its 46 Member States earlier this year in Reykjavik.

I congratulate the Council of Europe, all its bodies, including the Parliamentary Assembly, for having reacted swiftly to the Russian aggression against Ukraine, a situation which so ostensibly violates the rules of the Organization, and for all the support it is giving to Ukraine.

We supported the Register of Damage since the first hour and we are confident on the contribution it can bring to ensure accountability.

The Convention system, with the European Court of Human Rights at its very core, is the crown jewel of the Council of Europe.

The Court is the ultimate guardian of the human rights of the citizens of Europe. Likewise, the vast legal acquis of the Council of Europe is of immense value.

Only in 2023, Portugal acceded to 4 international instruments of the Council of Europe.

Ladies and gentlemen,

The Lisbon Forum, alongside with the North-South Prize, which has been awarded since 1995 to individuals and organisations that stand out in promoting solidarity, democracy and human rights, are the two best known brands of this Centre. Portugal actively collaborates with them.

The choice of this year's theme - "Human Rights, Environment and Economic Crimes: Youth at the forefront" - is of paramount importance.

Environment, youth and human rights. These 3 elements are deeply intertwined and need to be considered as a whole.

Tackling climate change is a priority area for Portugal and we are pleased that it is deserving increased attention by the Council of Europe.

Portugal fully supported the recognition by the United Nations of the human right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment and we hope that the Council of Europe can follow this example, implementing the various recommendations of the Parliamentary Assembly.

We are committed to the implementation of the Reykjavik Declaration, also in the context of the Council of Europe's strategic programme 2024-2027, including the Declaration on the Environment.

We fully support the creation of the Reykjavik Commission for the Environment and Human Rights and developing the organisation's work in this area.

We advocated for it during the negotiations on the Declaration.

We are now calling for it in the context the preparations of the 2024-2025 budget and programme, with Portugal having the important responsibility of chairing the ongoing negotiations.

The climate emergency is undoubtedly the greatest obstacle to the enjoyment of the right to environment today, especially for futures generations. The youth of today will inherit it tomorrow.

Therefore, it is essential that young persons are involved in the decision-making process, as they are also responsible for the decisions we take today. Their involvement in the process will guarantee a future with an inclusive and interconnected world.

Portugal has been an active player in youth issues, particularly in the context of the United Nations.

At the Third Committee of the United Nations General Assembly, Portugal biennially presents a resolution on “policies and programmes involving youth”, since 1999, adopted by consensus and with broad support from all regions.

It is also worth mentioning that Portugal organized, in 1998, the first World Ministerial Conference on Youth.

Recently, in 2019, Portugal again hosted the second meeting of its kind in Lisbon, where the Lisbon Declaration was adopted.

As the theme of this Forum suggests, youth must be at the forefront. Young persons are key players in the process of sustainable development, as we saw last month with the case of the young Portuguese who challenged thirty-two countries on their alleged climate inaction at the European Court of Human Rights.

For this reason, we must work together to ensure the universal respect for the right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment.

We believe that human rights and the environment go hand in hand and that a clean, healthy and sustainable environment is essential to the full enjoyment of human rights by present and futures generations.

I thank you.