**52nd session of the Human Rights Council**

**Annual full-day meeting on the rights of the child: The rights of the child and the digital environment**

**Statement by Volker Türk, United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights**

**10 March 2023**

President of the Council,

Excellencies,
Distinguished delegates,

I am extremely excited about this panel. It is a first of many firsts – the first time we have had a majority-child panel at the Human Rights Council, and the first time a High Commissioner for Human Rights has had the chance to have a conversation with children in this format. A lot more need to follow.

I’d like to thank Kidus, Nidhi and Mariana for travelling to Geneva from your homes to join us here. We really want to benefit from your experience, in particular online, and to teach us how we can do better.

When I go back to my own childhood, I cannot even imagine the world you live in today – we didn’t grow up with internet, computers or mobile phones.

But your lives have been shaped by technology and by the internet - you have instantaneous connection with others, you have knowledge and learning at your fingertips.

You have seen firsthand the promise of technology. But we also know that the rapid of progress does not come without risk.

What I would like us to do is imagine a world where you, your friends, and the generations that follow, are safe and are able to thrive in your lives, both online and offline.

If we look at today’s world, we know we are far from this reality.

But let’s not just look at the risks. Behind every risk, there is also an opportunity.

We know that the digital world is still in its early days. Like you, as children, the digital space has years ahead of it to grow, develop and flourish.

So let’s use this opportunity to shape and nurture it into a place where you can express yourselves freely, where you can be who you are, without any fear, in a safe environment

Where you can contribute to discussions on things that matter to you, where you can hear each other’s voices, and where you can take the lead in creating positive change for the world.

I would like to pay tribute to children and young people around the world for pushing us to do better. We owe that to you, given the state of the world, especially when it comes to climate change, pollution and biodiversity loss.

We know that more children and young people than ever before are online, either at home or at school. You are the most connected age group around the world.

But it really depends on where you are born. The digital divide means a staggering 2.2 billion children and young people under 25 around the globe still do not have access to the internet at home. It means that they are being left behind, unable to access education and training, or news and information that can help protect their health, safety and rights.

And we also know that there is a gap between girls and boys in terms of access to the internet, with girls often more disadvantaged.

It is important to us - and it is high time - to reinforce universal access to the internet as a human right, and not just a privilege.

Colleagues,

With rapid digital progress comes mounting risks and challenges.

Online bullying and harassment are rampant.

Toxic influencers may share dangerous, misogynistic, or racist views or calls to action.

We know that personal data can be used for illicit purposes.

We have also heard, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, the extent of the social pressures children can feel online - frightening social pressures which affect their mental health.

Restrictive laws, censorship and internet shutdowns around the world continue to impact children’s rights to information, to freedom of expression, to privacy and to education.

I call on Governments to take more decisive measures and to firmly put children’s best interests and rights at the centre of their policies and approaches.

Governments must also do more to hold business to account.

And, for their part, businesses must play a much more important role. We know that many algorithms that are built into online tools and platforms take advantage of children – with an end goal of expanding and maintaining the user base for profit.

Tech companies must incorporate respect for children’s rights into the design and implementation of digital tools and platforms, and they need to provide adequate safeguards and much more sophisticated guardrails for their protection.

We need to strive for online environments that allow children to interact and grow, away from harmful and addictive online habits or relentless comparison with their peers.

And governments and businesses also have a responsibility to close the digital divide, a division that is driving discrimination and inequality much deeper, especially within the Global South and between the Global South and the Global North.

Mr. President, young friends,

The children of our world are our future. You are also our here and now.

You cannot be reduced to a ‘user-base,’ effectively deprived of human agency.

Your rights must be protected, including the right to be heard.

We need children’s participation, your energy and drive to change this world for the better – both online and off.

I ask you today to imagine: what if we built an online world that was in the best interests of children, and where children can safely take advantage of every exciting opportunity technology can offer them?

I look forward to this conversation, and to this interactive dialogue.

Thank you.