**Statement of the Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs**

**of the Czech Republic**

**Human Rights Council, 43rd Session, 25th February 2020**

Madam President, Madam High Commissioner, Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

The United Nations mark the 75th anniversary this year. It has been contributing considerably to the world’s peace, security and development. As the only universal international organization, it is a unique platform for all states to meet and debate. Yet, one of its three pillars – the human rights pillar – remains seriously underfunded. Its annual allocation around 3 per cent of the UN budget does not even cover the very basic needs of the OHCHR. We welcome the Secretary General’s Call for Action and encourage him to take effective steps and stand up for a much needed reform.

Moving to the Human Rights Council, we support the Austrian presidency in further implementation of the Council’s efficiency measures. We need to focus on the substance of Council’s work and its real impact. Cutting down the length of speeches is simply not enough. As a staunch supporter of the international human rights mechanisms, we will also constructively approach the upcoming review of the United Nations human rights treaty bodies system.

Madam President,

The Czech Republic begins its second year as a member of the Human Rights Council. While advocating for all human rights, we are proud to carry on with our two national initiatives: equal participation in political and public affairs and freedom of peaceful assembly and association. This year, also the year of the 10th Anniversary of the Mandate of the Special Rapporteur on the Freedom of Peaceful Assembly and Association, we look forward to organising events on both of these initiatives and we hope that you will join us in these important conversations. The Czech Republic believes that citizens play an essential role in upholding the human rights standards. Civil society organisations and human rights defenders are neither our adversaries, nor competitors. They are our partners and allies in our common efforts.

Dozens of journalists are murdered every year and hundreds of them are imprisoned. We have to speak out and arrest this trend. Media workers cannot fear for their life just because they are doing their job. At the same time, the media freedom is increasingly abused by hostile state and non-state actors, using it for spreading malicious disinformation, destabilising democracies and undermining trust in governments, media and civil society organisations. For this reason, the Czech Republic became a member of the Media Freedom Coalition, an excellent project initiated by the United Kingdom and Canada. We must unite and confront this threat together.

Another pressing issue which is encompassing all our work today is the state of human rights in the digital context as highlighted by the High Commissioner. Online space is increasingly a crucial tool for human rights defenders, journalists and other media actors. We need to fight for their right to freedom of expression both online and offline. I would like to thank the government of Ghana for organising the recent Freedom Online Coalition Conference in Accra. It was encouraging to see the will and commitment of all its members to protect and promote human rights and freedoms in the online world.

Madam President,

Addressing country-specific situations is one of Council’s main responsibilities and it constitutes an important tool of its preventive function, which we strongly support. The Czech Republic remains deeply concerned about human rights situation in a number of countries. My delegation will address them throughout this session. Let me now mention just two of them:

We are witnessing a continuous and systemic worsening of the human rights situation in Russia. New repressive laws targeting civil society and independent media have been adopted. Respected international NGOs, such as the Czech humanitarian organization People in Need, are labelled as undesirable and cooperation with them is criminalized. Anti-extremist and anti-terrorist legislation is being misused to target civil society. The situation is particularly dire on the occupied Crimean peninsula. Nevertheless, despite the closing space for free expression and public participation, we can see a growing awakening of wider parts of Russian society demanding their voices to be heard. This deserves our attention and our support.

The Czech Republic also remains deeply worried about the ongoing political, social and economic crisis in Venezuela. We reiterate our full support for the interim President of Venezuela Juan Guaidó. We are severely concerned about recent acts against the functioning of the democratically elected National Assembly. We call upon the government to immediately address the pressing lack of food, medicine and social services in the country. We reiterate our call for holding free, fair and inclusive elections, which represent the only sustainable solution of the crisis.

Since a country’s human rights advocacy is only credible when the country itself is open to scrutiny, I am pleased to announce that the Czech Republic will present its UPR mid-term report shortly.

Ladies and gentlemen, let us never forget why we are here. Not for procedures, not for speeches. We are here to try our best and help people in this world who were not fortunate enough. Whose human rights are violated. Whose human rights we have to fight for. Thank you.