

Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO)**UN experts call on FAO to uphold human rights and protect staff**

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GENEVA – UN experts* today expressed dismay at recent remarks by the Director-General of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) that appear to downplay the role of human rights in the organisation’s work and raised serious concerns about the treatment of FAO staff who have engaged on violations of the right to food and of international humanitarian law in the Gaza strip.

“Human rights principles are not peripheral to the FAO’s mandate; they are central to it,” the experts said. “The FAO and its management, as international civil servants, are bound by the aims of the UN Charter which enshrines human rights values in its very preamble.”

Speaking at a high-level event at FAO Headquarters in Rome on 29 September 2026, the Director-General referred to the dismissal of senior FAO officials in terms that appeared to link their departure to their engagement with human rights issues. According to information received, the FAO’s highest management did not renew the contract of a highly respected Division Director, who had served the UN for 26 years, stating grounds that he had allegedly breached the standard of impartiality while carrying out technical work on starvation and famine in Gaza.

“FAO has an explicit mandate to protect humanity’s freedom from hunger and must not shy away from addressing conflict-related food insecurity, famine and starvation,” the experts said.

They said this includes technical work to document the use of starvation as a method of warfare and to analyse its implications under international humanitarian and human rights law. “Documenting starvation in Gaza gives effect to the law as stated by the International Court of Justice in its Advisory Opinion of 22 October 2025, which affirmed Israel’s obligations to ensure that the population has the essential supplies of daily life, including food, and to facilitate relief provided by the United Nations and its entities; it is not a departure from impartiality.”

“For the FAO’s leadership to publicly disregard the value of human rights, which are universal, indivisible and interdependent, in guiding the organisation’s technical work would represent a shocking inversion of institutional purpose,” the experts said.

“There is a risk of creating a climate of fear among staff,” the experts warned. “The required impartiality of international civil servants does not oblige them to remain silent when serious breaches of international law and of the Charter’s values are at stake.”

“On the contrary, silence or insufficient action in such circumstances can cast doubt on the Organisation’s independence and fuel perception of undue deference to donor governments,” they said.

“All staff members across the UN system must be able to carry out their work without fear of adverse consequences,” the experts said. “Any measures that could be perceived as reprisals and intimidation would risk undermining the trust and integrity of the organisation, and tarnish the reputation of the United Nations as a whole.”

The experts called on the FAO to uphold the values and principles of the UN Charter and ensure the application of the Standards of Conduct.

They urged Member States to raise the matter within the FAO's Governing Bodies and hold the organisation's leadership accountable to its values and to universally recognised human rights principles.

"We call on all UN entities to reaffirm that upholding human rights, including the rights to life and to food, and respect for human dignity, is an institutional mandate," the experts said. "An explicit commitment to these principles must be at the core of the upcoming election of the next FAO Director-General in 2027."

The experts have written to the FAO Director-General to convey these concerns.

OHCHR

*The experts:

Sofía Monsalve Suárez, the Special Rapporteur on the right to food

Andrea Bolaños Vargas, the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders

Surya Deva, Special Rapporteur on the right to development

Farida Shaheed, the Special Rapporteur on the right to education

Astrid Puentes Riaño, the Special Rapporteur on the human right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment

Gina Romero, the Special Rapporteur on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association

Leopoldo Maldonado Gutiérrez, Special Rapporteur on freedom of expression and opinion

Paula Gaviria Betancur, Special Rapporteur on the human rights of internally displaced persons

Margaret Satterthwaite, Special Rapporteur on the independence of judges and lawyers

Nicolas Levrat, the Special Rapporteur on minority issues

Francesca Albanese, the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Palestinian territory occupied since 1967

Shalmali Guttal, the Working Group on the rights of peasants and other people working in rural areas

Ana Brian Nougères, the Special Rapporteur on the right to privacy

Ai Kihara-Hunt, the Special Rapporteur on the sale, sexual exploitation and sexual abuse of children

Katarina Schwarz, Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of slavery and trafficking in persons

Bethanie Margaret Carney Almroth, the Special Rapporteur on the implications for human rights of the environmentally sound management and disposal of hazardous substances and wastes

Zaina Jallad, the Special Rapporteur on the negative impact of unilateral coercive measures on the enjoyment of human rights

Isabelle Mamadou (Chair), John Phillip Binondo, Barbara Reynolds, and Catherine S. Namakula, Working Group of Experts on People of African Descent

Elisa Morgera, Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of human rights in the context of climate change

Pedro Arrojo-Agudo, Special Rapporteur on the human rights to safe drinking water and sanitation

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