



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

Fourth International Human Rights Forum between the African Court of Human and Peoples' Rights, the ECHR and the Inter-American Court of Human Rights

Closing address by Arnfinn Bårdsen

Strasbourg / Arusha, 3 March 2026

Dear court presidents, fellow judges, registrars, distinguished guests, dear friends,

It is my great pleasure, as Vice President of the European Court of Human Rights, to be with you here in Arusha alongside my colleagues from the European Court's delegation at the Fourth International Human Rights Forum, Judge Anja Seibert-Fohr and Deputy Registrar Abel Campos.

The hospitality of the African Court on Human and Peoples' Rights, along with the rich and diverse programme prepared has provided an ideal environment for dialogue and to address the challenges we face six and a half years after our First International Human Rights Forum. I have had the privilege of participating in all of them – in Kampala in 2019, online in 2021 due to the Covid-epidemic, and in San José in 2023.

During that previous Forum in Costa Rica the three regional courts reaffirmed their commitment to institutional dialogue and signed the Second Declaration of San José. In particular, this Declaration recognised that *“democracy, good governance, and effective access to justice and independence of the judiciary are essential for the protection and realisation of human rights and effective democracy underpinned by the rule of law”*.

We know too well that the challenges we face in this respect do not stop at the borders of any continent – on the contrary, many require global collaboration for there to be effective long-term solutions. Even more so in times of crisis, there being an accentuated need for adequate legal safeguards against abuse.

The Fourth Forum here in Arusha the last couple of days has not only reinforced our joint conviction in the need of our human rights systems and deepened our dialogue. At a time when public confidence is waning and the values that underpin our human rights systems are being called into question, constructive dialogue between our judges, and also that between the Registries, becomes particularly important.

To listen, to learn, and to look forward. Sharing the responsibility.

I wish to express my warm thanks to all those that contributed to preparing this Fourth International Human Rights Forum, and those that took part in it – sharing from your insight and experience, as moderators, speakers and as active participants in our discussions.

As international judges we know by experience that judicial work is inherently collegial, and that the respectful exchange of views between judges is an expression of legal pluralism and broadmindedness.

Dialogue creates a legal fabric supporting judicial independence and the defence of the Rule of law.

It provides a platform to confirm and reinforce the authority of international adjudication.

It fosters a global community of judges united by shared values and a commitment to justice.

It enhances our resilience against attacks, political pressure and public campaigns aimed at delegitimising our work.

In the Second San José Declaration, our courts sought to “*overcome the common challenges and threats to the effective validity of human rights by working together*”. While the unprecedented challenges that we face grow ever more complex and overlapping, we will indeed stay loyal to this.

Today, 4 March 2026, we sign a new Memorandum of Understanding between our three courts, building on our cordial relationship and aiming at an even further strengthening of the existing dialogue between us, yet again reaffirming – as we did also in Kampala in 2019 – our desire to strengthen the relationship between the three courts “*through continued shared work and efforts*”.

And today, the 4 March of 2026, we adopt the Arusha Declaration. We recommit our courts to the noble calling of protecting democracy, the Rule of law and human rights. And we reaffirm the need to bring into life on a global scale the values that echo the 1948 Universal Declaration on Human Rights.

Dear court presidents, fellow judges, registrars, distinguished guests, dear friends,

Dialogue requires space – in the physical and intellectual sense – and indeed dialogue requires the freedom to debate, disagree, and discuss solutions. I extend my warmest thanks, on behalf of the European Court of Human Rights, to the African Court on Human and Peoples’ Rights for bringing us together and providing this space. For your hospitality, your collegiality, and your friendly professionalism.

In closing, I have the privilege of repeating the invitation extended by President Mattias Guyomar in his online opening statement yesterday morning. The next International Human Rights Forum – which will be the fifth – will be hosted by the European Court of Human Rights and will take place in Strasbourg in 2027. We are very much looking forward to seeing you there for our continued dialogue.