The UN Human Rights System Is Running Out of Money

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How does the UN funding crisis is impacting human rights?

Introduction

The United Nations human rights system is facing its most severe financial crisis since its creation. The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR has been forced into what High Commissioner Volker Türk calls "survival mode" (OHCHR, 2026i). This is a product of chronic underfunding, political obstruction and a dramatic withdrawal of financial support the world's wealthiest states. In 2026, OHCHR's combined funding stands at approximately $402 million, as to the latest figures of 31 August, representing a shortfall of $53 million compared to 2025.

This article examines the architecture of the UN human rights funding, traces the origins of the current crisis and assesses its consequences on the system such as treaty body systems, special procedures, and field oper-

ations. The picture that emerges is not merely only of financial shortfall but rather a system designed to depend on the voluntary goodwill of a few powerful states, and this can have a devastating impact on the global protection and application of human rights.

The UN Human Rights Funding System

The UN human rights system relies on two main funding streams. The first is the regular budget, funded through assessed contributions that all 193 member states are legally obliged to pay. The second is voluntary contributions: extrabudgetary funding that governments, foundations and private donors provide at their own discretion. Together, these two streams determine whether the OHCHR can carry out its mandate.

But what are the actual numbers? The regular budget has allocated OHCHR a total of $221.19 million, representing a reduction of $25.28 million compared to the 2025 approved budget of $246.47 million (OHCHR, 2026a). Against this, OHCHR appealed for $400 million in voluntary contributions (OHCHR, 2026b) and had received $181.6 million as of 31 August 2026 (OHCHR, 2026c), bringing its combined funding to $402.8 million. On paper, the appeal is nearly met but in practice, the composition of that funding tells a more troubling story.

This hybrid model is structurally precarious, because voluntary contributions are unpredictable, frequently earmarked for specific projects rather than core operations, and vulnerable to shifting political will. In 2025, donors earmarked 67% of voluntary contributions, up from 65% in 2024, while 53% of the total only arrived in the second half of the year (OHCHR, 2026d). Such late, restricted and unpredictable funding limits how OHCHR operates, as it often must respond to crises in real time with resources it does not yet have. In June 2025, The Commission of Inquiry on the Democratic Republic of the Congo could not proceed at all due to the liquidity crisis, with OHCHR stating it was unable to deliver results "until and unless funding is made available". (Human Rights Council, 2025)

The United States was traditionally OHCHR's largest single donor, contributing $36 million in voluntary contributions in 2024. In 2025, however, this landscape collapsed. The Trump administration due to its opposition to the global order halted the United States' voluntary contributions entirely, reducing them to zero. Furthermore, France also followed suit by pausing its contribution following budget cuts and backlash over international funding. The European Commission and EU member states tried filling the gap collectively providing 60% of all voluntary contributions (KAS, 2026). But this was not enough to fill the gap left by the US as overall contributions fell by $6 million.

By 2026, the donor landscape had been transformed. Norway, Sweden, the European Commission and the Netherlands now stand as the largest remaining donors (OHCHR, 2026c). Their contributions, while welcome,

cannot compensate for the loss of American funding. This shift is not merely a funding crisis. It reveals a structural dependency that has always undermined the human rights pillar: a system intended to provide universal oversight was made financially reliant on the discretionary contributions of a small group of powerful donor states. Their withdrawal does not just create a shortfall but rather it exposes the system's inability to function independently of the very actors it is mandated to hold accountable.

The Human Rights Pillar Has Always Been The Least Funded

The woes of the human rights system did not begin in 2025. The human rights pillar has always received the fewest resources of the UN's three core pillars: peace and security, development and human rights. It often receives roughly 5 to 7% of the UN regular budget and less than 1% of the total UN expenditure (ISHR, 2026a). By comparison, the development pillar receives nearly 19% of the regular budget.

This long-standing underfunding has intensified sharply in recent years. OHCHR received only 87% of its approved regular budget in 2024, a figure that fell to just 77.8% in 2025 (OHCHR, 2026d). As a result, the Office was forced to implement drastic measures, including a hiring freeze, the cancellation of mandated activities, and postponing reports formally requested by the Human Rights Council.

Then came the UN80 Initiative that deepened the crisis further. Launched by Secretary-General António Guterres in March 2025 to mark the UN's 80th anniversary, the Initiative was a system-wide reform process responding to a projected USD 16 billion shortfall in the UN's overall resource base between 2024 and 2026. The reform was structure around efficiency, mandate review and structural realignment, framing austerity as modernisation. Thus, it proposed a 15% reduction to the human rights budget, compared with 11.7% for development (ISHR, 2026a). Under the revised UN estimates, OHCHR's original 2026 budget proposal of $249.4 million was cut to $223.56 million, with a final approved budget of $221.19 million. a reduction of 15% (United Nations, 2025). Combined with existing shortfalls, this amounted to an actual budget cut of 10% compared to 2025.

What Is The Impact Of The Funding Crisis?

The consequences are concrete and severe. The treaty body system, a backbone of international human rights monitoring, was among the first casualties. The liquidity crisis eliminated more than 30% of meeting time, and six treaty bodies were forced to cancel one of their annual sessions in 2025 (OHCHR, 2026e). At least 35 state party reviews were postponed that year, and the resulting backlog of reports reached 332 by January 2026 (ISHR, 2026b).

Individual committees felt the strain acutely. The Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights was warned of a 40% reduction in meeting

time for 2026, which the Committee itself said would translate into less work and less impact for the people it serves (OHCHR, 2026f). The Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities saw its session time cut to just five weeks (OHCHR, 2026g). As of May 2026, the Committee against Torture reported 25 states parties with overdue initial reports, 40 with overdue periodic reports, and 176 individual complaints still pending (OHCHR, 2026h). Sessions of the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, the Human Rights Committee, the Committee on Enforced Disappearances and the Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities were each shortened by one to one and a half weeks (ISHR, 2026b). The lack of non-post funding meant essential accessibility services, including international sign language interpretation and captioning, could not be delivered for committee sessions (ISHR, 2026b).

More worrying, Special Procedures, the independent experts and rapporteurs who monitor thematic issues and country situations, suffered comparable cuts. Country visits fell by half, from two to one per year, and group sessions were also reduced by one-third or more (ISHR, 2026b). More than that, field operations were gutted with 17 operations being reduced or closed entirely (OHCHR, 2026i). For example, in Colombia, three of eight offices were closed, affecting the peace process and assistance to ethnic communities. In Chad, advocacy and support for nearly 600 detainees held without legal basis had to be discontinued. In Myanmar, the Office's programme was cut by 60%.

The human cost is measured in rights denied. OHCHR conducted only 5,000 monitoring missions in 2025, down from 11,000 in 2024, while losing approximately 300 staff out of 2,000 (OHCHR, 2026i). LGBTQI+ programmes were reduced by 75%, and human rights investigations saw staffing cut by roughly half, with two-thirds of planned missions cancelled (OHCHR, 2026i).

As High Commissioner Volker Türk warned: "These cuts and reductions untie perpetrators' hands everywhere, leaving them to do whatever they please. With crises mounting, we cannot afford a human rights system in crisis" (OHCHR, 2026i).

Conclusion

The budget crisis is a structural issue that was designed to work exactly as intended. It is a mechanism, designed to hold power to account but it was made financially dependent on the voluntary contributions of the very states it was meant to scrutinise. When those states decide that they do not hold any more confidence into that system, as the US has done, they expose how fragile its independence was.

This has not been helped by the budget cuts introduced by the UN80 initiative that has entrenched austerity as the organising principle of UN

reform. This has led to a great crisis with less meetings, country visits, research output, field operations, and many more crucial tasks performed by the OHCHR that are vital with the rising conflicts around the globe.

These are not just some statistics. They represent victims of all different kinds in so many countries that rely on UN to seek redress and ask for accountability and change so they can have a safer future.

The question as such is not whether the system can survive on less. It is whether states that claim to value human rights are willing to pau for the. On current evidence, the answer is no.

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