FORUM: Human Rights Council
ISSUE: The use of Genetic Data for National Security and Surveillance
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What is the UNHRC and how does it work?

The United Nations Human Rights Council is a subdivision of the United Nations tasked with monitoring the implementation of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). It plays a significant role in safeguarding human rights, enforcing accountability, and addressing allegations of violation. The committee reviews reports from member states on their human rights practices, as well as holding emergency meetings to respond to pressing situations and appointing experts to act as watchdogs in specific countries. It has played a particularly relevant role recently in monitoring human rights in Ukraine, Syria and Gaza, among others.

The UNHRC is composed of 47 Member-States, elected for three-year terms by ballot in the General Assembly of the United Nations, and a bureau presiding over the council. There are 13 seats for African states, 13 for Asia-Pacific States, 8 for Latin American and Caribbean, 7 for Western European and other, and 6 for Eastern European states. HRC vice-presidents in 2025 were Indonesia, Lithuania, Honduras, Finland and Paraguay, while its president was Switzerland.

More information can be found in the guidance documents available on the WESMUN website.

Background

The utilisation of genetic data (DNA/RNA analysis) for national security purposes presents serious ethical and legal challenges. Although this data offers potential to improve public safety and combat crime, incorrect usage could lead to severe human rights violations. Despite this, genetic surveillance technologies have been adopted by governments worldwide, notably China and Russia. In 2005, members of the European Union signed the Prüm Treaty, allowing the transnational exchange of information from national DNA databases for criminal intelligence purposes. These technologies have, in some cases, been used to track ethnic minorities and monitor dissidents, and critics argue that they foster abuse, racial profiling and the erosion of privacy.

Current situation

Today, the debate over genetic data for surveillance purposes reinforces tensions between individual privacy and state security interests. In some countries, governments have secretly collected such data and used it for nefarious purposes:

China has implemented a mass genetic data collection program in the Xinjiang region, gathering DNA samples, blood types and iris scans from millions of Uyghurs in so-called 'health checks'. It is widely believed that this data has since been used to monitor and control the Uyghur population.

Russia has recently passed a new law extending compulsory DNA data collection to millions more people. It is believed that this may in future be used along with facial recognition to threaten and prosecute activists, and to locate eligible people evading conscription.

Non-governmental human-rights actors have argued that practices such as these disproportionately affect vulnerable populations. Without robust oversight, genetic data could be used to forward systematic biases and deepen inequalities.

Barriers to regulation

Several barriers impede the effective regulation of genetic surveillance. Firstly, a lack of global consensus on the ethical and legal frameworks governing genetic data's use makes intergovernmental agreement difficult. States prioritise national security over human rights obligations, resisting global outcry.

Secondly, technological disparities mean that while some countries are able to freely exploit these tools, others lack the resources to even develop genetic databases or are then unable to monitor them responsibly.

Finally, the rapid evolution of such technologies further complicates enforcing regulations. Legislation needs to stay current and relevant, so ensuring that international human rights standards are maintained in a fast-changing field is a persistent challenge.