



United Nations Human Rights Council

First session

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High-Level Segment

Statement by

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on behalf of the European Union

Check against delivery

Mr. President of the Human Rights Council,
Mr. Secretary General,
Mr. President of the General Assembly,
Madam High Commissioner,
Excellencies,

At the General Assembly in September last year, many of us praised the Human Rights Council as one of the main achievements of the Millennium Review Summit.

Today I am honoured to speak on behalf of the European Union, the acceding countries and candidate countries at the first session of this body. On this occasion I would like to thank our tireless leader, Secretary General Kofi Annan as well as the President of the General Assembly, Foreign Minister Jan Eliasson. Both of them played a key role to establish this cornerstone of the ongoing UN reform. I would also like to thank the President of this Council, Ambassador Luis Alfonso De Alba, for his important contribution he has already made in putting the Council to work.

All along, the European Union has demonstrated its full commitment to the establishment of an effective Human Rights Council and we will continue to do so. Now, we have to seize this once in a lifetime opportunity to make a major step forward in improving the UN human rights system.

Berta von Suttner, a compatriot and the first woman to win the Noble Peace Price, said: "*There is only one honest way of protecting the*

persecuted from persecution: To stand by them." – It is our common responsibility that the new Human Rights Council will effectively make a difference for those in need of our support and protection.

We now have to build a Council that becomes the driving force for a strengthened UN human rights system. A lot of work still lies ahead to ensure that the Human Rights Council can fully realize its potential.

This work comprises several key elements:

Building on the positive legacy of the Commission on Human Rights, the Council must strengthen the system of UN experts in the field of human rights. We attach great importance to the system of special procedures; their independence and public reporting are essential features that we need to preserve.

Equally, the Council has to hear the voices of those we have been entrusted to protect. We therefore need to strengthen the active participation of human rights defenders and NGOs in the work of this Council.

Furthermore, we want the Human Rights Council to redress the shortcomings of the former Commission on Human Rights. We now have the chance to make the Human Rights Council a forum where we work consistently and cooperatively throughout the year to deal with the many challenges in the field of human rights.

The Human Rights Council shall help us to address the full range of human rights in a comprehensive manner. It shall be a forum to

exchange best practices and to increase assistance to states in their efforts to improve human rights. In all these efforts, the High Commissioner for Human Rights will have a key role to play. I express the appreciation and support of the European Union for the work of High Commissioner Louise Arbour and her team. Her office has assumed an ever-increasing role since the 1993 Vienna World Conference.

The ability of the Council to address promptly and effectively human rights issues and situations as they occur will be the yardstick that we will be measured by. To protect future generations from tragedies like Srebrenica and the genocide in Rwanda is the responsibility of each and every one of us.

The Human Rights Council will also provide us with an important forum to enhance dialogue and broaden understanding amongst our peoples, their cultures and religions. This is an important and long-term project.

Genuine dialogue must build upon our common commitment to the full and equal enjoyment of all human rights and to the full implementation of the norms and standards we have subscribed to. There is no room for complacency until every human being is able to fully enjoy his or her human rights. No state is immune to shortcomings in the field of human rights and all countries have to face different challenges.

The European Union, therefore, stands ready to work closely with all UN Member States to implement the General Assembly resolution of 15 March establishing the Human Rights Council.

This first session of the Human Rights Council will be critical for laying the groundwork. It is important that it is balanced and constructive. This is a crucial phase of establishing the foundations for the full capacity of the Council. We should be careful not to overburden it right from the start with issues fraught with divisive international political controversy.

We attach particular importance to progress our work for the establishment of the system of Universal Periodic Review, one of the innovative instruments at the disposal of the Council.

For the first session of the Council, another EU priority is the adoption of the convention for the protection of all persons from enforced disappearance. Victims and their families should not have to wait any longer for a better protection standard.

Mr. President,

I would like to highlight two further human rights challenges that await our response.

The first is the situation of women. In too many parts of the world, they are still denied equal rights, including equal access to economic resources and political decision-making. Progress on improving maternal health is lagging behind. Women, in particular girls, are disproportionately affected by HIV and AIDS. Trafficking of women and girls has increased rather than decreased since the 1995 Beijing Conference. Violence against women inside and outside the home still persists at an appalling rate.

Advancing the full enjoyment of human rights by women and girls will be decisive if we are to meet the Millennium Development Goals.

We need to enhance our resolve to ensure gender equality, including by anchoring it across UN institutions and activities. We will have to make sure that women are given a central role for instance in the work of the new Peace-building Commission. Equally, women who take initiatives concerning violence against women, for instance to eliminate the practice of female genital mutilation in their countries, need our support.

The EU is committed to support women human rights defenders, who put their freedom, safety and sometimes their lives on the line to advance the cause of human rights,

- women who rebuild their communities after conflict,
- women who stand up for the most vulnerable in their societies,
- women who stopped waiting for someone to free them.

One of these fearless women is Aung San Suu Kyi. Today on her birthday she would surely have hoped to join us here in freedom. In her acceptance message for the Sakharov Prize she reassured us that *“even under the most crushing state machinery courage rises up again and again, for fear is not the natural state of civilized man”*. Her vision and courage should be our inspiration in this forum.

Mr. President,

Fear must not win either when it comes to the unprecedented threat of terrorism we all face. We are often presented with a false dichotomy between security and human rights.

The EU firmly believes that successfully combating terrorism and respect for human rights are mutually reinforcing. The fight against terrorism must, therefore, be carried out with full respect for human rights and the rule of law. Nobody must be in a legal vacuum.

The prohibition of torture is and must remain absolute. In a few days, the Optional Protocol to the UN Convention against Torture and Other Cruel Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment will enter into force. This protocol will provide a comprehensive system of unannounced visits of places of detention,. The EU and its Member States reaffirm their commitment to its early ratification.

I hope that our work at this first session will be a reflection of our commitment to develop the new Human Rights Council into an effective instrument to attain the highest standard of human rights for all.

Thank you, Mr. President.