



Speech by the Vice-Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Cyprus,
H.E. Mr Sotos Zackheos

Human Rights Council 1st Session,
Geneva, 20 June 2006.

Check against Delivery

In addition to what was said by the distinguished Foreign Minister of Austria, on behalf of the European Union, I would like to make the following remarks.

Today is an important date for the international community. The official initiation of the work of the newly established Human Rights Council is a solid proof of the enhanced importance, the United Nations Organisation attaches to the question of human rights.

It is hoped that the establishment of the Human Rights Council while preserving the positive legacy, will avoid the deficiencies of the Commission and address the urgent need for monitoring the implementation of the International Human Rights Covenants and Conventions, with a view of accelerating the process of realizing our common vision of societies ruled by the rule of law and respect for human rights. Our priority of course is to terminate, on an urgent basis, the most gross systematic violations and emergencies, which stir world conscience. The impunity of perpetrators must come to an end. We should also proceed with the adoption of the Declaration on the Right of the Indigenous People.

These are indeed ambitious goals but lofty ones, and our populations demand no less. We are though pragmatists. Our deliberations, take place in an international environment marked by instability, fear about the future of the multilateral institutions, wars and armed conflict, inequality and poverty and a mistrust of the intentions of the different groups making up our organisation.

It is aspired that the Human Rights Council will initiate an honest dialogue and co-operation in human rights, away from political controversies, double standards and the pursuit of narrow national interests. The High Commissioner for Human Rights will have a key role to play. I express our wholehearted support and admiration for the leadership, foresight and the work of the High Commissioner Mrs. Louise Arbour and pledge our cooperation to her mission.

The international community is focused today on the fight against terrorism. Terrorism is a scourge and an affront to human dignity and warrants international response and joint efforts. The fight against terrorism must however not lead to the weakening of the human rights standards and norms that the international community has collectively codified. There can be no retreat from these principles which have been achieved through endless struggle and sacrifice.

Recent debates emanating from the controversy over respect for religious beliefs, personalities and symbols necessitate urgent steps for the enhancement of a calm, honest dialogue among diverse cultures, religions and civilizations. Religious discord and conflict within societies lead to gross violations of human rights. I am pleased to inform that Cyprus, together with Malaysia, is hosting the second Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) Interfaith Dialogue, due to take place in Larnaca, from the 3rd to the 5th of July 2006. This important conference will deal with

the issue of “Interfaith understanding and cooperation for a peaceful world” aiming at fostering inter-cultural understanding and inter-religious co-operation.

Today, on World Refugee Day, the attention of the people of Cyprus continues to be focused on the occupation of 37% of our territory and the consequent continuing human rights violations. We welcome the Pinheiro Principles on Housing and Property Restitution for Refugees and Displaced Persons and commend the Secretary General’s leadership in pushing for their elaboration. The principles emanate from international human rights statutes, multilateral treaties and resolutions of the Security Council, representing universally accepted human rights standards, such as the right to home, the right to adequate housing, the right to property, the right to private life and the right to non-discrimination. Most importantly for us, since one third of our population are refugees, forcefully driven away, from their properties by the invading forces, the Pinheiro Principles envisage the right to return to one’s home and the restoration of his/her property, as a means of conflict resolution, peace-building and restorative justice. The right to restoration of property cannot be substituted by compensation and the displaced owner’s right to his property supersedes the right of any third party acquiring an interest in the property.

Given the existence of these principles, to which humanity subscribes, it is particularly disturbing when an occupying power not only denies the refugee the right to return, but exploits the property offering it for sale to foreigners, aiming ultimately to the consolidation of the process of ethnic cleansing, the permanent deprivation of the human rights of the owner and the impediment of the settlement of the conflict, in accordance with the principles of international law.

Related to this issue, is the implantation of settlers in occupied territories by the occupying power. The transfer by an occupying power of its population to the area it occupies is considered a grave breach of the Geneva Conventions, as well as a war crime as stipulated also in the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court.

It is most disturbing however that, international conventions and principles of international law are not always upheld by the U.N. Organisation itself, when formulating proposals and plans for the resolution of regional conflicts. This was the case of the U.N. Plan that was prepared two years ago, under pressures and political expediencies, and therefore, not surprisingly, rejected overwhelmingly by 76% of the Greek Cypriots, in view of its serious imbalances and deficiencies vis a vis international law.

The drama of the fate of the missing persons is another tragic result of foreign aggression and military occupation. The international community should be adamant in demanding that occupiers co-operate in ending the agony of the missing persons’ families, including by opening the archives of their army and prisons. In that respect, the Republic of Cyprus welcomes the report of the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights on the establishment of the ‘Right to the Truth’ and supports the early adoption of the Convention on Enforced Disappearances.

The systematic deliberate destruction of a country’s cultural and religious heritage is another practice of an occupying force to be condemned. In Cyprus, there are more than 520 religious sites under occupation, which have either been desecrated or severely looted and the ecclesiastical artifacts illegally sold abroad.

I conclude by expressing our expectation that the Human Rights Council will steer away from theoretical approaches and political confrontations and that it will be at the forefront of the effort for the realization of the yearning of all people on this planet for living free from fear and insecurity, with full enjoyment of their human rights.