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**STATEMENT BY H.E. ERKKI TUOMIOJA
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**AT THE 1ST SESSION OF THE HUMAN RIGHTS COUNCIL
HIGH-LEVEL SESSION**

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**Statement by Mr Erkki Tuomioja, Minister for Foreign Affairs of Finland,
to the Human Rights Council, 1st Session
Geneva, 19 June, 2006**

Mr Chairman, Mme High Commissioner, Your Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen

Mr Chairman,

Let me first of all congratulate you on your election to the Chairmanship of this important first session of the Human Rights Council. I wish you every success in your challenging work.

In addition to what was said by Ms Ursula Plassnik, Minister for Foreign Affairs of Austria, I wish to make the following remarks.

Mr Chairman,

I am honoured to address the Human Rights Council today when this significant body convenes for the first time. The establishment of the Human Rights Council satisfies the wish clearly expressed by our Heads of State and Government in the UN World Summit last September. At the Summit, human rights were acknowledged, along with peace and security as well as development, as the main pillars of the United Nations system and the foundations of collective security.

The Council is needed to address current human rights challenges, such as more effective protection of human rights in the combat of terrorism and contribution towards more balanced globalization, to name but a few of the challenges. I hope that the Council will provide a forum for dialogue between civilizations to promote the human rights of all, including women, children as well as ethnic, religious, sexual and other minorities.

To turn this vision into reality, a new human rights culture is needed. The Human Rights Council should be based on a renewed spirit of genuine partnership and shared responsibility. Finland, which is one of the 47 states elected as members of this inaugural Council, pledges to work in a transparent manner and together with others, with a view to protecting and promoting human rights all over the world. A lot is expected from us. We owe it to all human rights defenders to strive to fulfil the ambitious mandate entrusted to this Council.

Mr Chairman,

It is important that this Council make a fresh start. The Commission on Human Rights achieved a lot, but - surely - there is room for improvement.

As Ms Arbour, High Commissioner for Human Rights, has put it, present challenges for human rights protection necessitate a heightened focus on implementation. This is also a key element in the Finnish approach for the new Council. We need to be more practical, oriented towards on-going developments, and the useful role the Council can play. Human rights is a political subject and, also in the future, difficult situations will arise. However, we believe that a lot can be achieved by developing new working methods geared towards implementation, dialogue and, to the extent possible, cooperation.

Let me take dealing with country situations as an example. According to the resolution establishing the Human Rights Council, the Council has a mandate to address human rights situations, including gross and systematic violations, and make recommendations thereon. Indeed, I believe a Human Rights Council barred from addressing situations in different countries would be just

as absurd as would be a Security Council unable to deal with any concrete threats to international peace and security.

However, this does not mean that the ways and means of dealing with these situations should remain the same as before. I sincerely believe that it would now be in everyone's interest to search innovative ways that would, above all, be useful from the point of view of improving the situation on the ground.

The reports of the Special Procedures and of the High Commissioner will, no doubt, be among the key bases for discussion concerning different situations. The longer meeting time enables a genuine interactive dialogue to take place with these mechanisms. The more permanent nature of the new Council gives room for more concrete follow-up and also for enhanced efforts in terms of capacity-building and cooperation and helps address the different needs arising from each situation.

Finland is looking forward to the new Universal Periodic Review and, as a new member, hopes to be among the first countries discussed. This mechanism extends to all countries on the basis of existing human rights standards, starting with members, thus underlining the universal nature of human rights and the special responsibility of the States elected to the Council.

Mr Chairman,

Let me now address the issue of transparency, and the role various stakeholders can play in the new Council.

The creation of the Human Rights Council and the first elections generated a lot of interest globally. For instance in my own country Finland, I believe the new Council is already much more widely known than its predecessor was.

It is now essential that we continue to work in an open and transparent manner, making it possible for all interested parties to follow how we use the mandate entrusted to us. To this effect, we must also take a critical look at what we produce. Excessive repetition and empty words should be avoided. The main focus should be on tangible measures aimed at promoting human rights.

The EU has always emphasized the role of NGOs as one of the strengths inherited from the Commission on Human Rights. According to the Finnish view, active participation of the various stakeholders, including NGOs, is a necessary precondition for an effective Human Rights Council.

The participation of civil society and other relevant stakeholders could be further developed. For instance, a Council meeting throughout the year can liaise more with regional human rights mechanisms, and benefit more from the results of the work of existing regional bodies. Furthermore, the participation of parliamentarians could be encouraged in instances where this could be beneficial for the subject discussed. The Council should also develop its interaction with the media.

Mr Chairman,

In its pledges and commitments made before the elections, Finland undertook to do its best to ensure that the Human Rights Council fulfil the expectations that the people of the world are placing on it. This, of course, includes a pledge to fully cooperate with the Council and all its mechanisms. I believe that in this respect we should only expect the best from the States that have chosen to run as members for this inaugural Council.

No country is perfect in terms of human rights protection. In its pledges Finland committed itself to various measures aimed at addressing existing shortcomings in the country, and steps are already being taken to fulfil these pledges. We expect the other 46 members of this first Council to do the same. For Finland, the pledges and commitments represent the new culture we hope to prevail in this Council. As the resolution establishing the Human Rights Council puts it, Members elected to the Council shall uphold the highest standards in the promotion and protection of human rights.

I wish every success to the new Council and all those willing to contribute to its work.

Thank you.