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TO THE OFFICES OF THE UNITED NATIONS, ITS SPECIALISED AGENCIES
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STATEMENT BY

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AT THE

**HIGH LEVEL SEGMENT OF THE
FIRST SESSION OF THE HUMAN RIGHTS COUNCIL**

GENEVA

June 19, 2006

Mr. President,
President of the General Assembly,
Secretary General of the United Nations,
High Commissioner for Human Rights,
Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

On behalf of the Government of India, I would like to congratulate you, Mr. President, on your election as the President of this historic first session of the Human Rights Council. We are confident that under your able guidance, this Council shall have a smooth and effective beginning. May I assure you of our full support in this endeavour.

I feel privileged to be present here today to witness this landmark moment, the birth of a new organization, the Human Rights Council. A few months back, the Member States of the United Nations demonstrated again their unwavering commitment to strengthen the UN human rights machinery when they resolved to create the Human Rights Council as a subsidiary of the UN General Assembly. They recognised the need to reform the international human rights machinery to secure effective enjoyment by all of all human rights, including the right to development.

This is a milestone in the long journey that we have collectively undertaken since the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948. The Twentieth Century witnessed many upheavals and instances of denial of human rights. It also witnessed gradual development of an international human rights machinery to respond to these challenges. While there have been some successes, we are still a long way from realising the goal of "inherent dignity of man", as promised in that Declaration, for many around the world. By establishing the Human Rights Council, the international community has reaffirmed its resolve and commitment to constantly adjust and improve its framework for addressing human rights challenges.

Mr. President,

People around the world have high expectations from the new Council. They hope that the new body will make a real difference on the ground and give voice to the concerns and aspirations of the underprivileged. Much has been said in the recent past about the achievements and shortcomings of the former Commission on Human Rights. While there is a clear recognition of the Commission's tremendous contribution in the areas of standard setting and development of human rights norms, it is also commonly recognised that the Commission's credibility and effectiveness suffered because of politicisation. We now have a new body and it is up to us to make this body a success, by introducing a new work culture of cooperation and mutual understanding and to avoid repeating the mistakes of the past.

In its first year the new Human Rights Council is to establish a Universal Periodic Review mechanism, which should ensure equal treatment of all Member States and also prevent selectivity and double standards. While improving and rationalising mandates, mechanisms, functions and responsibilities of the former CHR, the HRC should adopt an

even-handed approach in dealing with civil and political rights on the one hand and economic, social and cultural rights, including the Right to Development, on the other. It also needs to work towards transforming into reality the commitment to the Right to Development contained in the Resolution establishing the HRC.

Another major challenge that the international community is confronted with today is that emanating from terrorism. Terrorism is one of the greatest scourges of our times. The international community should recognize that terrorism is a direct violation of human rights, in particular the most basic rights, the right to life and liberty.

Mr. President,

India has a long tradition of promoting and protecting human rights. It was privileged to be in the forefront of the struggle against apartheid since even before independence.

Our commitment to human rights flows from our firm belief that in a truly pluralistic society, growth and welfare of citizens can be ensured only through a culture of promotion and protection of human rights. This was the vision of our nation's founding fathers who, while very carefully framing our Constitution, guaranteed fundamental civil and political rights and also made provisions for the progressive realization of economic, social and cultural rights.

Our democratic polity with an independent and impartial judiciary, free and independent press, a vibrant civil society and powerful and independent National Human Rights Commission provide the basis for nurturing a culture of respect for and promotion and protection of human rights in India. These institutions guarantee full and free enjoyment of human rights by all our citizens.

India has also taken an important initiative for the empowerment of women by reserving one-third of all seats for women in urban and local self-government, thus bringing over one million women at the grassroots level into political decision making. Meanwhile, the right to work is being significantly realised with the launch of the National Rural Employment Guarantee Programme earlier this year.

Having said that, Mr. President, India's commitment to the promotion and protection of human rights is not limited only to our domestic concerns. It is also integral to our foreign policy. We attach great importance to the work of the United Nations human rights machinery. We have actively participated in deliberations on human rights in international fora for promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms for all. India played a leading role in the historical struggle for decolonization and abolition of apartheid. We were among the very few select countries who were members of the former Commission of Human Rights throughout over 60 years of its existence.

Mr. President,

The Human Rights Council should emerge as a forum for voluntary participation and sharing of national experiences and best practices in the protection and promotion of human rights. As national governments shoulder the primary responsibility for the protection of human rights, the Council should devise means to provide, upon their request, technical and financial assistance to enable them to more effectively address human rights concerns. Only in this way can we create an environment of trust and confidence which will encourage those who are in real need, to come forward and seek assistance to build up their capacities to harness their resources for promotion and protection of human rights in their respective countries.

Mr. President,

We may recall Mahatma Gandhi's conviction that means are always as important as ends. This is particularly relevant in today's context. We all agree on the larger objectives to be pursued through the UN human rights system. However, it is equally important to ensure that the means for attaining those objectives do not create confrontation and divisiveness.

As we look ahead to the future and craft a vision for a peaceful and humanitarian world order, I can do no better than recall what our Prime Minister Dr. Manmohan Singh said in a recent speech and I quote:

"Our nation was built on the foundations of a deep and abiding commitment to the values of liberal, social democracy. Pluralism, secularism, multi-culturalism and the principles of equity, social justice and the rule of law are core values of our civilisation and the bedrock of our Republic.

If there is an "idea of India" by which India should be defined, it is the idea of an inclusive, open, multi-cultural, multi-ethnic, multi-lingual society. I believe that this is a dominant trend of political evolution of all societies in the 21st century. Therefore, we have an obligation to history and mankind to show that pluralism works"

At the heart of this vision lies the individual, and our commitment to human rights is a manifestation of our commitment to guarantee every human being a life of dignity and freedom.

Thank you.