



Statement by Mr. Noel Treacy, T.D.,

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At the Human Rights Council High Level Segment

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Mr. President,

Firstly let me warmly congratulate you on your appointment as President of the Council. As Secretary-General Annan said, the Council is indeed lucky to have such an eminent and experienced person at the helm for its first year.

I am delighted to be here on this historic occasion and to have the opportunity to set out an Irish perspective on the Human Rights Council.

We have been presented with a great opportunity to improve the human rights machinery of the United Nations. We must seize that opportunity. In doing so we must collectively reflect carefully on how the Council can best achieve its full potential.

It must make itself relevant by confronting the very real and practical problems the world faces today in ensuring genuine respect for human rights. We hope that through this Council there will be a decisive shift to the effective implementation of the human rights standards crafted by its predecessor.

The compelling need for an effective international forum to advance the promotion and protection of human rights is self-evident. Countless individuals and communities throughout the world still live in situations in which they are denied their fundamental rights. Some 300 000 children are actively involved in armed conflict. Last year, between 600 000 and 800 000 people were trafficked across international borders. The number of people infected by HIV/AIDS worldwide has reached about 40 million.

There is no need for me to continue enumerating the many ways in which people's rights are violated. We are all conscious of the huge scale of the problem. We are also all conscious that no country has a perfect human rights record. The challenge is to determine how best we can work in concert to improve the protection of human rights both in our own countries and globally.

Ireland firmly believes that a renewed commitment to effective multilateralism is the best means to achieve that end. Over the past sixty years, the international institutions of the United Nations have grown and strengthened in step with human progress.

These institutions have served us well. But they have not always proved fully equal to the enormous tasks that they faced. At times, our efforts to create a rules-based international order have not been adequate.

The Commission on Human Rights has indeed left an important legacy in many areas, including standard setting, the development of the Special Procedures and in fostering a dialogue with civil society. However, it also had failings of which we are all aware.

In short, the Council should preserve the best aspects of its inheritance, while being willing to innovate and improve where necessary.

We must create a positive and constructive environment in the Council and learn from each other, as befits a real partnership.

The Council should offer its assistance and encouragement to Member States when it is appropriate. The Council should however also be able to point out when international human rights standards are being neglected or wilfully violated. To argue that there is no room for criticism is to undermine the very notion that animates the human rights machinery of the UN. I have already said that no State has a perfect human rights record and I don't think anyone here would disagree.

If our commitment to the idea of human rights is sincere, it follows that we must seek to tackle those imperfections and speak frankly about them.

Mr. President,

I am confident that the Human Rights Council will provide us with a better forum to do that. It will meet more frequently than its predecessor. This will give it the capacity to respond to difficulties that emerge in real time. It is also to be hoped that through its new universal periodic review mechanism, the Council will have the capacity to engage in a more comprehensive manner with the human rights records of individual Member States.

There is no need for this to be an antagonistic process. States should engage with it sincerely, acknowledging problems where they exist and pointing out where they have encountered difficulties in implementing international human rights standards.

Ireland is committed to ensuring that the Council lives up to its potential. Both members and non-members alike have important work to do during this and future sessions of the Council.

We have a great responsibility in taking part in this inaugural session. The tone that is set now will have an impact on the future work of the Council. While there are many important technical issues that need to be resolved over the coming days and weeks, it must be remembered that the most decisive factor in determining the success of the Council is our intent. Do we intend to make this Council a useful instrument in the promotion and protection of human rights? Do we intend to engage with it in a sincere and honest fashion? Do we intend to accept criticism when it is warranted, even if it is uncomfortable to do so?

If we can genuinely answer yes to these questions, I believe that the other difficulties we face in consolidating the Council will be resolved amicably.

Ireland certainly intends to engage with the Council in this fashion. The Irish Minister for Foreign Affairs, Dermot Ahern, served as one of the Secretary-General's Special Envoys for UN reform. We are determined to see the commitments made at the World Summit in September 2005 fully implemented and the proposals for human rights reform laid out in the Outcome Document are of particular importance to us.

In addition to taking an active role in the negotiations that led to the establishment of the Human Rights Council, Ireland has increased its funding to the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights and is one of its largest voluntary contributors. We have a particular appreciation for the work of the OHCHR – indeed, as you all know a former President of Ireland, Mary Robinson, served as High Commissioner for Human Rights. We are particularly supportive of the OHCHR's increased activities in the field of technical cooperation, which are of vital importance in relation to the dissemination of expertise and capacity-building.

The more practical side of human rights work has long been of greater interest to us than the theoretical debates in this area, although these too have their own importance. Ireland is, in particular, active on the issue of human rights defenders. The work done by the Special Representative of the Secretary General on Human Rights Defenders is a striking example of well-focussed activities by a UN Special Procedure and of practical human rights work with tangible benefits. We hope to continue our

partnership with civil society on human rights defenders in the context of the new Council.

In general, Ireland believes that civil society groups are vital partners in the area of human rights. Though we may not always agree on all issues, NGOs have a wealth of experience and knowledge from which States can learn a great deal. I am therefore very optimistic that the Council will continue and hopefully build on the practice of the Commission in engaging in a fruitful dialogue with civil society.

Mr. President,

I wish you and all the delegates present here today every success with the inaugural session of the Human Rights Council.

People around the world have high expectations of this body. It represents a new beginning and a great opportunity to advance the promotion and protection of human rights. There is undoubtedly much hard work still to be done but if we all engage sincerely and constructively with the Council, I know that we can make it a success. Those concerned with the promotion and protection of human rights, and in particular victims of human rights abuses, deserve no less.