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Commemoration of

HUMAN RIGHTS DAY

**and the launch of a year-long campaign to
celebrate the 60th**



**ANNIVERSARY OF THE
UNIVERSAL DECLARATION OF
HUMAN RIGHTS**

**10 December 2007
Palais des Nations, Room XVII**

Monsieur le Président,
Excellences,
Mesdames et Messieurs,

C'est avec grand plaisir que je participe aujourd'hui au lancement d'une campagne qui durera toute une année pour célébrer le 60ème anniversaire de la Déclaration Universelle des droits de l'homme. Le Conseil des droits de l'homme est assurément l'endroit le plus approprié pour commémorer le triomphe sans précédent qu'a représenté, dans le combat de l'être humain en faveur de la non-discrimination, de l'égalité et de l'impartialité, la Déclaration proclamée il y a 60 ans.

Depuis lors, nous avons indéniablement fait beaucoup de chemin sur une route que la Commission des droits de l'homme, structurant le cadre posé par la Déclaration Universelle, a délibérément laissée ouverte. De la position avantageuse que nous avons aujourd'hui, il nous apparaît bien sûr que, pendant ces derniers 60 ans, des points de vue différents et des retards dans la réalisation des droits humaines ont conduit à remettre parfois en cause la viabilité des idéaux de la Déclaration, et par conséquent, la vitalité, l'importance et l'applicabilité de son édifice normatif. Et pourtant, je pose la question: quelqu'un, quelque part, renoncerait-il aujourd'hui volontairement aux droits, aux libertés, aux garanties et aux aspirations contenues dans la Déclaration?

Mesdames et Messieurs,

Nous ne pouvons mettre en doute la pertinence de la Déclaration Universelle des Droits de l'Homme dans le monde toujours perturbé dans lequel nous vivons.

Par contre, il faut bien avouer que le consensus sur lequel la Déclaration a été fondée est secoué quotidiennement par les divisions profondes qui opposent les trop bien nantis aux trop pauvres, les puissants aux faibles, les maîtres de la technologie aux analphabètes, les agresseurs à leurs victimes.

La Déclaration Universelle a pourtant elle-même vu le jour dans un monde profondément perturbé; elle a couvé dans les cendres de la deuxième guerre mondiale et de l'Holocauste, à une époque où l'espoir était une denrée rare. En 1948, la majeure partie du monde en développement était encore sous le joug de lois coloniales et de régimes non démocratiques, et l'esclavage, qui n'avait pas été aboli, était honteusement pratiqué. La guerre froide était lancée, une guerre civile ravageait la Chine, le Moyen-Orient s'embrasait et dans la péninsule coréenne se préparaient d'autres affrontements. Malgré tout, les Etats membres des Nations Unies avaient réussi à mettre de côté leurs réclamations partisans et leurs intérêts locaux pour s'engager solennellement et solidairement à poursuivre la recherche du plus grand bien commun.

Excellencies,

Now as then, all States, not only all people, continue to affirm their commitment to the content of the Declaration at every solemn opportunity. Most recently, they have done so at the 2005 World Summit.

World leaders reiterated their pledge to “promote universal respect for and the observance and protection of all human rights and fundamental freedoms for all in accordance with the Charter, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other instruments relating to human rights and international law.” They added that: “The universal nature of these rights and freedoms is beyond question.”

This reaffirmation should come as no surprise. The Declaration has inspired Constitutional principles in some 90 States. All States have ratified at least one of the core nine international human rights treaties that flesh out the Declaration’s framework, and 80 percent have ratified four or more. The process of adopting the Declaration’s norms, translating them into law, and putting them into effect is still ongoing at the international and national levels, with regional entities increasingly involved as well. Such perpetual quest for human rights rests on what Eleanor Roosevelt, the first chairperson of the Commission on Human Rights, identified as the duty of endowing all of us with “the freedom to help develop the future.”

Indeed, the Declaration continues to underpin everyone’s aspirations for a better future and for the life in dignity to which we are all entitled.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The enduring appeal of the Declaration’s principles stands in stark contrast with the downfall of many ideologies which, in their quest for dominance, had compelled debates, framed policies, and shaped international relations before and after the Declaration’s birth and for

much of the 20th Century. Other value systems will undoubtedly come to the fore jostling in the arena of ideas to capture the hearts and minds of future generations. The management of competing claims on scarce resources will remain a moving target and keep challenging governments and civil society alike. Yet, there can be no question that the UDHR's articulation of what individuals are entitled to solely by virtue of their humanity represents an unassailable legacy.

I recognize that, since the adoption of the Declaration and with increasing frequency, some have openly questioned the soundness and reality of the universality of human rights. This criticism has been expressed by many in good faith, albeit in the mistaken belief that universal principles are inimical to the promotion of pluralistic diversity, or cultural specificity, or free enterprise. Some sceptics argue that civil and political rights—as articulated in the Declaration—belong solely to western traditions and agendas, and are not as widely shared as their advocates believe. For their part, critics coming from liberal economic perspectives are wary of the Declaration's economic and social rights which they regard as either hampering free market practices, or imposing too cumbersome obligations on States, or both. Finally, others have articulated rejectionist positions simply to better preserve privileges and power uniquely for themselves and a selected few, while denying the rights of everyone else.

Mr. President,

Far from being a partisan concoction, suitable to some cultures, but irrelevant or even harmful to others, the Declaration was the product of the pondered judgment of an inspired group of eighteen framers who came to then fledging Commission on Human Rights from diverse backgrounds, regions and legal traditions. They sought a “common standard of achievement” for all to share which would help to secure a “higher standard of life” and a “greater enjoyment of freedom.” They produced a strong normative canvass of interdependent liberties and social responsibilities. It expressed an understanding of what governments should not inflict on their people, as well as a recognition of their positive duty to empower and protect the vulnerable.

This “composite synthesis” was attained after nearly three years of intense negotiations at the Commission and after 81 meetings of the third committee of the General Assembly. On December 10, 1948, the full assembly adopted the Declaration without dissent. In the assembly’s hall, recalled Hernán Santa Cruz, Chile’s representative and member of the Commission: “... there was an atmosphere of genuine solidarity among men and women from all latitudes, the like of which I have not seen again in any international setting.” Just one day previously, the General Assembly had unanimously given the green light to another fundamental building bloc of the international human rights and international humanitarian law systems, the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The solidarity and balance that the world mustered sixty years ago represent an equilibrium we should never cease to strive for, irrespective of how our approaches may vary today or in the future.

Indeed, there is no reason to believe that today we have less to share and no common vision to rely upon. Universal principles do not suffocate pluralism and difference. Rather, as Charles Malik, the representative of Lebanon and one of the Declaration's framers, put it, they "either bring to light an implicit agreement already operative, perhaps dimly and unconsciously, in the systems and ways of life of various states, or consciously and creatively advance further and higher the area of agreement."

As we advance this area of agreement further and higher, we must devote every effort to removing the obstacles that continue to hamper the implementation and fulfilment of all human rights standards.

We can begin by taking full advantage of the additional contiguity among peoples and cultures generated by modern means of communications. These intensified contacts can help reinforce and actualize our commitments to dignity and justice for all of us.

With this in mind, the Secretary-General has launched the UHDR year-long campaign which will engage the whole UN system in promoting the Declaration's ideals and principles. Together with local partners, UN agencies will also advocate specific areas of human rights that are most pertinent to their work and to the needs of the communities in which they operate. Our website will carry updated information about cultural initiatives, public discussions, and the many other unfolding

activities that will mark the forthcoming anniversary. My Office will lead these efforts with the objective of increasing knowledge and awareness of human rights in order to enable all rights holders to realize their entitlements.

These celebrations are meant both as tributes to an extraordinary human achievement and as reminders that the task of making the Declaration a living reality for everyone to enjoy is incumbent upon each of us. I do not doubt our collective willingness and ability to fully deliver on the promises made 60 years ago. The sustained effort to do so must be nowhere more visible than in this Council.

Thank you.