

UN SECRETARY-GENERAL TELLS HUMAN RIGHTS COUNCIL THAT COMMITMENTS AND ACCOUNTABILITY ARE NEEDED TO MAKE HUMAN RIGHTS A REALITY FOR ALL  
3 March 2008

Following are the remarks made by United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon on Monday, 3 March at the Palais des Nations to the opening of the seventh regular session of the Human Rights Council:

“I am honoured to be with you at the start of this seventh session. This is a pivotal year in the cause of human rights around the world, as we seek to strengthen the work of this Council while marking the 60th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Over the past six decades, the international human rights enterprise has made remarkable, even triumphant, strides.

We have also learnt that to make human rights a reality for all -- to implement and enforce these rights where it matters -- we need clear commitments, and we need clear accountability for those commitments. Such accountability depends on the collective efforts of international organizations and Governments, as well as civil society. It requires appropriate checks and balances and relentless scrutiny, so as to prevent or correct abuses and negligence. It is a duty of the highest order for each individual State, and the *raison d'être* of the Human Rights Council.

Almost two years have now passed since this Council was inaugurated. You have clearly set its direction on the right track in establishing your mechanisms and procedures.

The question for the Council, however, is whether you are fully meeting the high expectations which the international community has of you. What are those expectations? Most fundamentally, and in line with the very core jurisprudence of human rights, they are that this Council will recognize and promote the universal application of human rights values -- and that it will do so without favour, without selectivity, without being impacted by any political machinations around the world.

If you meet this benchmark, you can count on my fullest support and defence in the face of criticisms and attacks, wherever they may come from.

Essential to the proper functioning of the Council's machinery is the system of independent Special Procedures -- your vanguard mechanisms for early detection of problematic human rights situations and sustained protection.

The Universal Periodic Review, on which you are about to embark, was conceived to prompt, support, and expand the promotion and protection of human rights on the ground. This is a historic undertaking, with significant consequences for people around the globe. It must help ensure that assessments are fair, that review processes and methods are transparent, and, crucially, that nations are accountable for progress, stagnation or regression in the implementation of human rights standards.

No country, however powerful, should escape scrutiny of its record, commitments and actions on human rights. The Review must reaffirm that just as human rights are universal, so is our collective respect for them and our commitment to them. It must help prevent the distrust that surrounded the work of the Commission on Human Rights in its final years.

But the Universal Periodic Review is only one of your tools. Throughout the year, in your regular

and special sessions, you must remain vigilant and proactive -- by sounding early warnings, by pushing for implementation, by insisting on accountability. You must respond to crises as they build up or unfold, and address situations of concern that are neglected or forgotten by the international community.

Let us be clear: implementing international obligations entails difficult, focussed, sustained and often thankless work. But it is not hopeless. We now have wide and increasing acceptance of human rights standards. We have expanding jurisprudence of international, regional and national mechanisms. We have evidence that human rights are actionable at all levels.

The Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, with all the authority of my office behind it, has for many years played a crucial role in advancing the cause of human rights worldwide, and continues to do so.

Together, you can build on the synergies that come from your mutually reinforcing but independent and distinct mandates. I look to you to proceed on this collaborative path, as laid out in the General Assembly resolution which led to the creation of this Council.

You also have my personal commitment. To underscore it, I have mobilized the entire UN family in our campaign for the 60th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. With concrete initiatives and result-oriented advocacy, this effort will bring us closer to the goal of fully integrating human rights in all aspects of the work of the United Nations. In this way, we can advance the original vision of the Declaration: one indivisible set of rights, inalienable to all humankind.

Ultimately, the work to uphold human rights rests on integrating human rights obligations into national legislation and policy, and using these to prevent and punish violations. But the Human Rights Council is responsible for securing such an outcome. Your power lies in persuading rather than compelling, in cooperating rather than imposing mandatory measures. Your power stems from credibility, not force. Your power gathers strength and resonance from the respect you enjoy among nations around the world. Your power must be exercised at all times, in the face of all threats to human rights, wherever they occur.

Your institution-building phase is now nearly over. For the Human Rights Council to fulfil its true promise, you must create an environment of trust. You must foster a climate where best practices thrive. You must spur greater accountability for action on human rights. That was certainly the hope of the framers of this Council, it was the conviction of the world's Governments when they united behind it, and it was the spirit in which our predecessors drafted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. I trust you will live up to their expectations. It is an outcome in which all humankind has a stake".

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