

SECRETARY-GENERAL TO COMMISSION ON HUMAN RIGHTS: I HAVE MADE HUMAN RIGHTS A PRIORITY IN EVERY UNITED NATIONS PROGRAMME

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FOLLOWING IS THE STATEMENT BY
UNITED NATIONS SECRETARY-GENERAL KOFI ANNAN
TO THE FIFTY-FIFTH SESSION OF THE COMMISSION ON HUMAN RIGHTS,
DELIVERED AT THE PALAIS DES NATIONS TODAY AT NOON.

'It is a special pleasure for me to join you for this century's last session of the Commission on Human Rights. In any year, your work in combating violations of human rights and establishing norms to protect them makes history and helps save lives.

This year, however, as we look to a new century of human rights –and, regrettably, of new threats to those rights– I salute your determination to ensure a firm foundation for the rights of future generations.

As Secretary-General of the United Nations, I have made human rights a priority in every programme the United Nations launches and in every mission we embark upon. I have done so because the promotion and defense of human rights is at the heart of every aspect of our work and every article of our Charter.

Above all, I believe human rights are at the core of our sacred bond with the peoples of the United Nations.

When civilians are attacked and massacred because of their ethnicity, as in Kosovo, the world looks to the United Nations to speak up for them. When men, women and children are assaulted and their limbs hacked off, as in Sierra Leone, here again the world looks to the United Nations. When women and girls are denied their right to equality, as in Afghanistan, the world looks to the United Nations to take a stand.

Perhaps more than any other aspect of our work, the struggle for human rights resonates with our global constituency, and is deeply relevant to the lives of those most in need –the tortured, the oppressed, the silenced, the victims of ‘ethnic cleansing’ and injustice.

If, in the face of such abuses, we do not speak up and speak out, if we do not act in defense of human rights and advocate their lasting universality, how can we answer that global constituency?

Will we say that rights are relative, or that whatever happens within borders shall not be of concern to organizations of sovereign states? No one that I know of can today defend that position. Collectively, we should say no! We will not and we cannot accept a situation where people are brutalized behind national boundaries. For at the end of the 20th century, one thing is clear: a United Nations that will not stand up for human rights is a United Nations that cannot stand up for itself.

On the eve of a new millennium, we know where our mission for human rights begins and ends: with the individual and his or her universal and inalienable rights –to speak, to act, to grow, to learn and to live according to his or her own conscience.

For every right we proclaim, hundreds of abuses are committed every year. For every voice whose freedom we secure, many more are still threatened. For every woman or girl whose right to equality we uphold, thousands more suffer from discrimination or violence.

For every child whose right to education and peaceful childhood we seek, far too many remain beyond our reach. Truly, our work is never done.

The Commission on Human Rights can claim with pride to have been an architect of the international structure of rights that we have today. From this Commission came the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the binding treaties which, taken together, have created an international code of human rights.

Whether it is the struggle for Gender Equality and the Rights of Women, or the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, or protecting the rights of minorities and indigenous peoples, the Commission has been a pioneer in establishing norms and advancing justice.

In the vital work of implementation, you have contributed greatly to promoting economic, social and cultural rights, and your work on the Right to Development has opened up new horizons in the field of human rights.

Recognizing that human rights are inter-related, indivisible and interdependent, you have helped ensure that the implementation of social and

economic rights goes hand in hand with political and civil rights.

Through technical cooperation for human rights at the local, national and regional levels, you have helped bring human rights home to where they belong: in the lives of the weakest, most vulnerable of our world.

And in the important work of implementing the Convention on the Rights of the Child, whose tenth anniversary we will commemorate this year, you have reaffirmed the principle that human rights begin at birth.

These are the accomplishments in which you can take great pride. If, as Eleanor Roosevelt said, human rights begin in small places, it is equally true that they must be supported, strengthened, renewed and implemented by great institutions such as the United Nations.

Only thus can we be certain that the world-wide web of human rights that we have created will secure the dignity and humanity of every man, woman and child.

And yet, as this audience knows only too well, gross and shocking violations of human rights continue daily around the world –offending the global conscience, outraging all people of good will, and undermining our deepest sense of a shared humanity. If we cannot respond to such acts, if we cannot step in where the suffering is greatest, then the foundations that we lay elsewhere will crumble beneath the weight of these violations.

The Commission on Human Rights has long recognized this reality. Upon entering the United Nations, developing countries in particular sought to enhance the Organization's capacity to respond to gross violations of human rights. Since then, a vast array of working groups, Special Rapporteurs, representatives, envoys and experts on human rights have traveled the world over –planting the flag of human rights, extending the reach of your Commission, and giving victims hope for a better freer, less repressive future.

The achievements of the last fifty years are rooted in the universal acceptance of those rights enumerated in the Universal Declaration, and in the equally universal abhorrence of practices for which there can be no excuse, in any culture, under any circumstance. Who in this hall –or anywhere in the world– would deny the wickedness of torture? Who would justify the unspeakable practice of 'ethnic cleansing'? Who would defend slavery or stand in support of racial, sexual or religious discrimination? Who would advocate arbitrary or extra-judicial justice?

You may think –'well, such people do exist'– but let us say with one voice: they will not prevail.

Still, I believe it is not enough for us to be known by what we are against. The world needs to know who we are against, no less. In the age of human rights, the United Nations must have the courage to recognize that just as there are common aims, there are common enemies. We should leave no one in doubt that for the mass murderers, the 'ethnic cleansers', those guilty of gross and shocking violations of human rights, impunity is not acceptable.

The United Nations will never be their refuge, its Charter never the source of comfort or justification.

They are our enemies, regardless of race, religion or nation, and only in their defeat can we redeem the promise of this great Organization.

This year, I have chosen to dwell not only on our common aims and shared accomplishments, but also on the magnitude of the human rights abuses we are committed to ending.

I have, in particular, sought to draw your attention to the importance of combating the most outrageous violations in the field of human rights—the gross violations which in too many cases include summary executions, widespread forced displacement, massacres, and indiscriminate attacks on civilians.

I have done so because this last Commission on Human Rights of the 20th Century is meeting under the dark cloud of the crime of genocide.

Of all gross violations, genocide knows no parallel in human history. The tragic irony of this age of human rights—where greater numbers are enjoying human rights than perhaps ever in history—is that it has been repeatedly darkened by outbursts of indiscriminate violence and organized mass killings. In Cambodia, in the 1970's, up to two million people were killed by Pol Pot's regime. And in this decade, from Bosnia to Rwanda, thousands upon thousands of human beings were massacred for belonging to the wrong ethnicity.

Though we have no independent observers on the ground, the signs are that it may be happening, once again or once more, in Kosovo.

Every time, though, the world says 'never again'. And yet it happens. The vicious and systematic campaign of 'ethnic cleansing' conducted by the Serbian authorities in Kosovo appears to have one aim: to expel or kill as many ethnic Albanians in Kosovo as possible, thereby denying a people of their most basic rights to life, liberty and security. The result is a humanitarian disaster throughout the region.

We all deeply regret that the international community, despite months of diplomatic efforts, failed to prevent this disaster. What gives me hope—and should give every future 'ethnic cleanser' and every state-backed

architect of mass murder pause— is that a universal sense of outrage has been provoked.

Emerging slowly, but I believe surely, is an international norm against the violent repression of minorities that will and must take precedence over concerns of state sovereignty.

It is a principle that protects minorities—and majorities—from gross violations. And let me therefore be very clear: even though we are an organization of Member States, the rights and ideals the United Nations exists to protect are those of peoples. As long as I am Secretary-General, the United Nations as an institution will always place human being at the centre of everything we do. No government has the right to hide behind national sovereignty in order to violate the human rights or fundamental freedoms of its peoples. Whether a person belongs to the minority or the majority, that person's human rights and fundamental freedoms are sacred.

This developing international norm will pose fundamental challenges to the United Nations.

Of this, there can be no doubt.

But nor can there be any doubt that if we fail this challenge, if we allow the United Nations to become the refuge of 'ethnic cleanser' or mass murderer, we will betray the very ideals that inspired the founding of the United Nations.

This hope for humanity may have come too late for the desperate thousands who have been forcibly expelled from their homes in Kosovo, and for the hundreds, if not thousands, who have been murdered simply for who they are.

But it will not have come too late for the United Nations, if it emboldens us to enter a new century with a renewed commitment to protecting the rights of every man, woman, child—regardless of ethnic, national or religious belonging'.