

UNITED NATIONS



NATIONS UNIES

THE SECRETARY-GENERAL

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REMARKS TO HUMAN RIGHTS COUNCIL

Geneva, 12 December 2008

Distinguished Members of the Human Rights Council,
Madame High Commissioner,
Mr. President,
Excellencies,
Director-General Ordzhonikidze,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

On this sixtieth anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, I have a message to the peoples of the world:

Congratulations!

Mabrouk!

祝贺 Zhùhè!

Félicitations!

Pozdravlyayu!

Felicidades!

From Abkhaz to Zulu, the Universal Declaration is the world's most translated document. It is available in three hundred and sixty languages. Its tenets have been absorbed into the constitutions of many newly independent States and new democracies. Its words ring in every corner of the planet.

The Universal Declaration embodies groundbreaking principles: the universality of human rights, and their indivisibility.

It enshrines the interdependence of security, development and respect for human rights.

And it places a moral obligation on States not to pick and choose among rights and freedoms, but to uphold them all.

The Declaration's framers proclaimed the inherent dignity and equality of all human beings. They unequivocally linked destitution and exclusion with discrimination. They understood that social and cultural stigma makes it impossible for people to obtain justice or participate fully in public life.

The Universal Declaration was born following the utter devastation of the Second World War. The international community drew ideals, principles and achievements from diverse cultures to form this foundation on which we have built a great tower of human rights law.

We are still adding to this edifice. Just two days ago, the General Assembly adopted the Optional Protocol to the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. This past May, the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities entered into force. And last year, the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance was opened for signature.

Earlier this year, I had the privilege of meeting one of the activists who pushed for the treaty against enforced disappearances. Her name is Estela Barnes de Carlotto. She joined a movement of Argentine grandmothers after her own daughter disappeared. Eventually she became a force for international action.

I was deeply moved by her story. She is exceptional – but she is also typical of the human rights defenders on the frontlines of abuse who have risked their lives to ensure that others are protected.

It was disabled persons who led the process of drafting the treaty on their rights.

It was torture victims who stood up against the atrocities they had endured.

And it was women who fought gender discrimination.

Today is also their day: a day to pay tribute to all the activists who refused to be silenced by their tormentors. Who knew that right must triumph over might. Who were inspired by the Declaration into elaborating specific laws that now protect countless people around the world.

The world did not adopt such an impressive list of human rights instruments just to put them on a shelf somewhere at the United Nations. These should be living documents that can be wielded by experts who scrutinize country reports or assess individual complaints.

Many delegates meet at the United Nations, but among the most passionate are the human rights experts. I have seen them start early in the morning, work through lunch and turn out the lights late at night. They are making the most of every single opportunity to protect human rights. Today is their day, too.

Non-governmental organizations carry the banner as well. Whether working with states or in opposition to them, these groups are crucial in pressing for the rule of law and holding governments to their promises. They may be outspoken, but they are not out of line. Today is also their day.

The press likewise deserves credit for bringing human rights abuses to light. Courageous journalists have risked and lost their lives to report on threats against others. This anniversary is a milestone for them, too -- a day on which to stress again the need for media to be free to do their job, and free of harassment, intimidation and worse.

We have come a long way since the Declaration's adoption. But the reality is that we have not lived up to its vision -- at least not yet. Abject poverty, shameful discrimination and horrific violence continue to plague millions of people. As we mark this milestone, we must also acknowledge the savage inhumanity that too many people in our world must endure. There is no time to rest.

This Council can have a tremendous impact. But you, its members, must rise above partisan posturing and regional divides. One way to do this is with continued vigilance in carrying out the Universal Periodic Review, which assesses the human rights records of all States. The Council must address human rights abuses wherever they occur. The Council should also press countries to follow the recommendations of the independent experts and treaty bodies monitoring human rights. All Member States share a responsibility to make the Council succeed.

Member States should also do more to support the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights. Since its creation fifteen years ago, the Office has grown from a fledgling mechanism into an engine for change. It has expanded its global presence, elevated the profile of human rights, and provided expert advice to States and within the UN system. And it has done so while preserving the independence and impartiality that are crucial for human rights work and advocacy. I urge all Member States to strengthen support for the Office and the leadership of High Commissioner Pillay.

The Universal Declaration was created as "a common standard of achievement for all peoples and all nations". Today is a day for all peoples in all countries to celebrate. But it is also a day on which we must pledge that the work of human rights defenders, non-governmental organizations, experts, policy-makers, journalists and all people of conscience must continue until the timeless and universal principles in this Declaration become not just an inspiration or an aspiration, but the foundation of life for all of the world's people.

Thank you.