



STATEMENT BY

**THE PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED NATIONS
GENERAL ASSEMBLY
H.E. MR. JAN ELIASSON**

**FIRST SESSION OF THE
HUMAN RIGHTS COUNCIL**

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Mr. Secretary-General, Mr. Director-General, Madam High Commissioner, Excellencies, Distinguished delegates, Friends,

I think we all agree that today we are all part of an historic occasion, the opening of the first session of the Human Rights Council. We are entering a new chapter in the United Nations' work on human rights.

In the days and weeks to come the world will closely follow and scrutinize this Council's work and its commitment to the principles enshrined in the Universal Declaration and in the founding resolution, General Assembly resolution 60/251. Today, the world is behind you, supporting you, new members, urging you to live up to this commitment.

Let us briefly recall the steps we have taken together and the achievements that led us to today's event.

First, let us all pay a special tribute to the Secretary-General of the United Nations. In his report "In Larger Freedom" Kofi Annan reinforced the vision of a United Nations founded on three pillars: development, peace and security, and respect for human rights, all mutually reinforcing. Without an effective human rights machinery, the United Nations as a whole would diminish in credibility. To place human rights on the same level as peace and security and development and to stress the interdependence of all three pillars was an historic contribution to achieve security in a broader sense, a life in dignity for all.

The 2005 Summit – the largest meeting of world leaders ever assembled – endorsed the vision of the Secretary-General. At the Summit, our leaders took a number of decisive steps to strengthen the UN human rights machinery, including strengthening the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, mainstreaming human rights throughout the United Nations system and creating a Human Rights Council.

As you recall, I was mandated to conduct open, transparent and inclusive negotiations, to be completed as soon as possible during the sixtieth session of the General Assembly, with the aim of establishing the mandate, modalities, functions, size, composition, membership, working methods and procedures of the Human Rights Council.

As you also know, I appointed two Co-Chairs to assist in this task, Ambassador Arias of Panama and Ambassador Kumalo of South Africa. One brought experience of the struggle for democracy in Latin America; the other brought experience of the struggle against apartheid. My appointment of two Co-Chairs from the global south was no coincidence. I have always taken issue with seeing human rights in the north-south perspective. The dedication of the Co-Chairs was instrumental in achieving the final result of the negotiations.

On 23 February, after thorough consultations, I presented a draft resolution on the Human Rights Council to the membership of the United Nations. As we all know, this text was adopted on 15 March. I can tell you that it was not an easy decision to bring this matter to a vote. But the alternative to a consensus decision – which was not possible – was in my mind continued negotiations

and no Human Rights Council in a long time. It is worth remembering that the foundation for our work with human rights within the United Nations, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, was also adopted by a vote.

Negotiating the establishment of the Human Rights Council was a challenge for all of us. We live in turbulent and difficult times. Issues of human rights lie at the heart of nations and are particularly sensitive as we all know. Member States, which spared no time and effort in these negotiations, felt strongly about certain issues. Ultimately, no Member State obtained everything it wanted. The adoption of the resolution meant compromising on several points. But – and to me this is critical – we never compromised on the principles enshrined in the Universal Declaration.

We constructed a sharper instrument to promote and protect human rights. We now have a Council that is built on cooperation and dialogue, yet, it is principled and strongly anchored in human rights law. It is a Council that will review all Member States' fulfillment of their human rights obligations, thereby ensuring equal treatment of all.

By adopting this resolution – which represented the fruits of our – your – combined labour and aspirations – the General Assembly of the United Nations demonstrated that it can take decisions which are relevant and meaningful to the peoples of the world. And by that I think our work contributed to the revitalization – the necessary revitalization – of the General Assembly. And this the Members States did despite the tensions and mistrust sometimes all too apparent in today's world.

The resolution on the Human Rights Council was also a victory for multilateralism. It showed that you, the Member States, require a strong United Nations role and engagement in human rights. Never before have we needed strong and well-functioning multilateral institutions as we do today. Without them we cannot achieve our common global objective to free all people from fear, want and indignity.

Excellencies, Distinguished delegates,

Let us take satisfaction and inspiration from the fact that we have created and established a new Human Rights Council. This has been done in a time of divisions among peoples, cultures and religions.

At this moment, the United Nations, through the new Human Rights Council, sends a message of respect of human dignity and a message of hope and solidarity to the peoples of the world.

The resolution gives the framework and global legitimacy to the Council and represents a unique opportunity for a fresh start of the work on human rights within the United Nations. I recognize that having a fresh start does not mean denying the value of the work of the Commission. We all agreed to build on the strengths of the Commission on Human Rights, such as the NGO participation and the system of Special Procedures.

But let us also be vigilant of the negative dynamics of the past. We have created this new institution to further strengthen the United Nations human rights machinery and to enhance the promotion and protection of all human

rights for all. In our task, let us be guided by a spirit of renewed cooperation and of upholding the highest standards of human rights.

Now the first year of work of the Human Rights Council is crucial. I am encouraged by the skilful preparation of the Council's work under the leadership of Ambassador de Alba of Mexico. I am confident that you will address the challenges ahead of you in the same constructive and committed manner as you showed during the establishment of the Council.

You, who created and inspired the creation of the Council, demonstrated foresightedness as well as a sense of compromise and responsibility during the arduous road to completion of our work. Now you have to show determination and courage to translate intentions and words to the changing of realities and taking action. This requires from all of us statesmanship and preparedness not only to examine each other but also to examine ourselves.

To conclude, we must place the human being in the center. It is human beings who suffer in conflicts. It is human beings who die in terrifyingly high numbers from hunger and disease. It is human beings who are oppressed and silenced.

The United Nations Charter reminds us of our fundamental duty: to serve the peoples of the world. It is "we the peoples" who give us the direction representing the voices of the afflicted men, women and children.

Let us together prove that our new Human Rights Council will make a difference in their lives.

