

FOR H. M. QUEEN NOOR

INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY: "Women and HIV/AIDS"

March 8, 2004

**Mr. Secretary General, dear friends, it is my privilege to be here today with you on what I think is the most important day in the United Nations calendar: International Women's Day. Today, and every day, it is crucial to recognize the paramount importance of women in every sphere of human progress and security.**

**Global security is the original mandate of the UN, and its overriding concern today. But its work over the past several decades proves that achieving genuine security requires far more than arms, borders and treaties. Only by focusing on a broader, human based security can we achieve an effective antidote to the inequities that breed conflict and terror. And women are absolutely central to that human security.**

**The Millennium Development Goals provide a roadmap to genuine security, and increasing women's empowerment may be the single most direct route to fulfilling those goals. Women's work reduces poverty and hunger, promotes improvements in maternal, child and general health, enables women to pursue education for themselves and their children, and gives them the confidence to make their voices heard, in the family, the community and even in national government.**

**But the challenges women face, especially in the developing world, are as monumental as their contributions could be. In every area, women do more and are acknowledged less. They bear the brunt of violence in conflict, but are excluded from peace negotiations. They are expected to educate families but are denied education. They do the lion's share of the work, but are paid little — or in the case of domestic work for their own families, nothing. They bear the children, but seldom control their own sexual lives. They hold communities together, but are politically and economically marginalized. They cope daily with political, social,**

**sexual and legal discrimination that strangles their potential. And that hurts us all.**

**This is particularly evident in the Middle East. The groundbreaking UNDP 2002 and 2003 Arab Human Development Reports underscored how these harmful deficits in equality underlie our shocking lack of development, and the insecurity it foments.**

**Which brings us to the focus for this year's Women's Day. All of these challenges also increase women's risk for HIV/AIDS, which in turn inflames insecurity.**

**In the Middle East and North Africa we have so far escaped the worst of this tragic pandemic — but not entirely. Recent reports suggest an estimated 600,000 people are living with the virus in our region. Tragically, about 45,000 people died of AIDS last year. These numbers, although considered modest compared with other regions, are unacceptable.**

**While our data are limited, our experience may still provide some revealing extremes. Despite an infection rate among the lowest in the world, the proportion of those infected who are female— 55 percent as of 2002 — is higher, especially in conflict areas, than anywhere except Sub-Saharan Africa.**

**Paradoxically, both of these facts can be attributed to geography, economics, and especially to social and cultural norms concerning women, men, sexuality and family. Our strong sense of family and religious traditions may inhibit behavior that spreads the virus, but at the same time, those traditions may inhibit testing and reporting of those who may be infected. Experts have questioned the accuracy of these low rates of infection, due to the widespread stigma attached to the disease. Many of those who carry the HIV virus would simply rather die than risk encountering rejection— or worse — from family, friends and community. And in a culture where, tragically, women in particular can sometimes be at risk from their own families at any suggestion of sexual**

**impropriety, the risks are magnified. The biggest challenge to countering the spread of HIV/AIDS in our region now is overcoming the stigma and cultural taboos that prevent the vulnerable from protecting themselves against infection and seeking out the timely diagnosis and treatment they need.**

**A few countries are providing essential services, such as sexual health hotlines in Egypt, Palestine and Lebanon, Tunisia's confidential counseling centers for young people, national action plans in Algeria and Lebanon, in Iran, a vigorous taboo-breaking public awareness campaign, and programs in Egypt to help out-of-school girls.**

**The relatively low level of HIV/AIDS in the Middle East right now presents a risk or an opportunity: a risk to underestimate the potential danger of the pandemic and delay action; or the opportunity to mobilize the political and social will to act forcefully to reverse that spread.**

**The most effective way to do that is to focus on women.**

**For both cultural and physiological reasons, women are at least twice as susceptible to HIV infection as men. Pregnant women can also pass the virus on to their children. Research has linked women's disempowerment directly to increased rates of HIV/AIDS infection. Addressing women's critical lack of access — to resources, to information, to freedom of choice — can transform them from primary victims to prime agents in the fight to end this disease.**

**In the Middle East, and throughout the world, HIV/AIDS is not simply a public health crisis but a human rights issue — and especially a women's rights issue. In the fight against this plague, as in so many of our other global challenges, we must focus on the needs and capabilities of women. To stifle their rights, hamper their work and deny their contributions not only demeans them, but prevents progress. It is time to place women at the center of all our endeavors, today, tomorrow, and every day until we achieve the security we seek.**