

28 February 2011

**Statement of H.E. Mr. Joseph Deiss,
President of the 65th Session of the General Assembly,
at the High-level Segment of the 16th Session of the Human Rights
Council**

Mr. President,
Madame High Commissioner,
Excellencies,
Distinguished delegates,

It is a happy privilege for me to be here with you today, and to speak before the Human Rights Council. It is evidence of the firm ties between the General Assembly and the Council.

Mr. President, I am pleased to note that we are fully engaged, you and I, in a coordinated and cooperative re-examination of the work of the Council, and I am grateful to you for this.

Human rights lie at the heart of the mission of the United Nations Organization, on par with peace and development. As Kofi Annan pointed out in his report “In larger freedom”, “there is no development without security and no security without development, and neither security nor development can exist without respect for human rights”.

These three pillars are inseparable, and mutually reinforce each other. For those who may have forgotten, or have yet to be convinced, the events shaking the Arab world today serve as reminders of that reality. The masses have stood up.

The creation of the Human Rights Council five years ago has allowed this vision of the three pillars to be solidified: by being put under the charge of a subsidiary organ of the General Assembly, human rights came to occupy a higher level in the United Nations system. More responsive and equipped with new tools, inter-Governmental cooperation in that area gained new momentum.

This was vital. We need a strong Human Rights Council to meet the expectations of all those around the world whose rights continue to be violated, and of all those around the world who stand against those violations. We need a strong Human Rights Council to live up to what we proclaim in the Charter, we the peoples, who are “determined to reaffirm faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person, in the equal rights of men and women”.

What is involved here is the legitimacy and the credibility of the Council and of the United Nations Organization overall. This is indispensable if we wish to ensure the United Nations a central role in global governance.

The fact that the Council held an emergency special session on Libya is an important sign. The General Assembly will meet tomorrow afternoon in response to the recommendation contained in the resolution. The situation in Libya is deeply shocking. Not addressing this issue would have been a serious failure, a great loss of credibility for the Council and the UN.

It is you, the member States, who are the strength of the Council. It is up to you to take on your responsibilities. In becoming members of the Council, you commit yourselves to strengthening the promotion and protection of human rights. This starts by setting an example, in observing the highest standards of human rights and in cooperating fully with the Council. There can be no double standards in this regard. This is nothing less than a duty, as we confront the aspirations of the peoples, and all the men and women who hope and struggle for their rights to be respected and for violations of them not to go unpunished. It is a moral obligation, in the name of humanity.

The Council has accomplished much in its nearly five years of existence. It has set up its institutional framework. It has conducted many examinations of the way in which each State honours its human rights obligations and commitments. It has tackled many urgent human rights situations. It has promoted the development of new standards, as well as the implementation of existing ones. It has managed to forge consensus on difficult issues, thanks to the engagement and constructive spirit of its delegates. For me, the picture is largely positive.

The Council has now arrived at a critical juncture in its existence. We are in the middle of a re-examination of the work and functioning of the Council. The General Assembly has begun to debate a range of issues connected to the revision of the Statute of the Council, in particular the question of the relationship between the Human Rights Council and the General Assembly, especially the Third and Fifth Committees.

To my knowledge, there have been no calls, either in Geneva or in New York, for a fundamental overhaul of the institution. This confirms my perception that the Council has a solid foundation. If changes are needed, they should be of an exclusively practical nature, and should be limited in scope, designed to further improve the Council's effectiveness and responsiveness and enable it better to fulfill its mandate.

The President of the Council and I are agreed that the discussions to be held in New York will be based on progress made in Geneva, and will be finalized once the review in Geneva has been completed. I am glad that the working group has adopted the review document by consensus, and I congratulate them. I thank you, Mr. President, for the excellent leadership you have provided in that task. The next step is now the adoption by the Council of that document and its transmission to New York, so that we may be able to bring the entire process to completion in July 2011.

Before concluding, I should like to thank the High Commissioner and her team for their remarkable work. I should also like to pay tribute to the representatives of civil society and the non-governmental organizations for their participation in the work of the Council and their involvement on the ground. My recognition and encouragement also go out to the defenders of human rights, who often act despite risks to their own lives and the lives of those close to them. Their actions are commendable.

And to all the delegates assembled here in this room, I wish you constructive deliberations for the entirety of this session. May you be guided by a spirit of consensus and of common interest; be ready to compromise, but not to sacrifice your principles.

Ladies and gentlemen,

My thoughts go out to all the oppressed. In the words of Elie Wiesel, “there is one right I would not grant anyone, and that is the right to be indifferent.” Together, let us take action so that the values of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights become a reality.

Thank you for your attention.