

Check against delivery

THE SECRETARY-GENERAL
ADDRESS TO THE HUMAN RIGHTS COUNCIL
Geneva, 19 June 2006

Mr. President Luis Alfonso de Alba, let me first congratulate you – or rather, let me congratulate the Council on choosing you as its first President.

This choice augurs well indeed for the Council's future work. We at UN Headquarters in New York know you well, from your time in the Permanent Mission of Mexico there. We know you as a most accomplished diplomat and a resolute champion of human rights – in fact, definitely the right person for this crucial task.

Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen:

It is hardly an exaggeration to say that the eyes of the world – especially the eyes of those whose human rights are denied, threatened or infringed – are turned towards this chamber and this Council.

A great effort has been made, by Member States and by civil society worldwide, to bring us to this point.

And a new era in the human rights work of the United Nations has been proclaimed.

I trust that all members of the Council are fully aware of the hopes that have thus been raised, and are determined not to disappoint them.

They certainly should be aware, because all of them, in seeking election to this Council, have made pledges both to respect human rights at home and to uphold them abroad. Moreover, the General Assembly has required them to uphold the highest standards in the promotion and protection of human rights, fully cooperate with the Council, and submit themselves to the universal periodic review mechanism during their term of membership.

Their peoples – and the peoples of the world – will be watching to see whether those standards are indeed upheld.

Dear friends,

Let us briefly recall the journey that has brought us here. Last year, in my report “In Larger Freedom”, I stressed that human rights form the third

of the three pillars, with economic and social development and peace and security, on which all the work of the United Nations must be based.

I argued that these three are interlinked and mutually reinforcing, and are the pre-requisites for our collective well-being. No society can develop without peace and security. No State can be secure if its people are condemned to poverty without hope. And no nation can be secure or prosperous for long, if the basic rights of its citizens are not protected.

In short, lack of respect for human rights and human dignity is the fundamental reason why the peace of the world today is so precarious, and why prosperity is so unequally shared.

I am glad to say that world leaders, at the Summit last September, endorsed this vision.

They resolved to integrate the promotion and protection of human rights into national policies, and to support the further mainstreaming of human rights throughout the United Nations system.

And they accepted my suggestion that, in order to establish human rights at its proper level within the system, they should create this Council, directly elected by the General Assembly, to work alongside the Security Council and the Economic and Social Council.

They also resolved to strengthen the Office of the High Commissioner, and the General Assembly has since decided that this Council should assume the former role and responsibilities of the Commission on Human Rights relating to the work of that Office. I too wish to thank the High Commissioner for the outstanding leadership she is giving in the expansion and transformation of our human rights work. And I urge all members of the Council to give her their utmost support.

Let me also congratulate the President of the General Assembly on the consummate skill with which he managed the negotiations leading to the establishment of this Council, which will – I am sure – be remembered as a historic achievement.

For the moment it is a subsidiary organ of the Assembly. But within five years the Assembly will review its status. I venture to hope – and I suggest it should be your ambition – that within five years your work will

have so clearly established the Human Rights Council's authority that there will be a general will to amend the Charter, and to elevate it to the status of a Principal Organ of the United Nations.

If that ambition is to be realised, the Council's work must mark a clean break from the past. That must be apparent in the way you develop and apply the universal periodic review mechanism; in your willingness to confront hard issues and engage in difficult discussions, where these are necessary to remedy – or, even better, to prevent – human rights violations; and in your readiness to make good use of your ability to meet more frequently than the Commission did, and to call special sessions.

What must be apparent, above all, is a change in culture. In place of the culture of confrontation and distrust, which pervaded the Commission in its final years, we must see a culture of cooperation and commitment, inspired by mature leadership – which cannot rest only on the shoulders of your President, but must be collective. The General Assembly has given you a good set of rules to start from, but ultimately your success or failure will be determined by your working methods, and by the aspirations and attitudes that inform them.