

Statement by the President of the General Assembly
on the occasion of the commemoration of the sixty-fifth anniversary of the
Universal Declaration of Human Rights

10 December 2013

President of the General Assembly
H. E. John W. Ashe

Excellencies,
Deputy Secretary-General Eliasson,
Assistant Secretary-General Šimonović,
H.E. Mr. Henczel, President of the Human Rights Council,
Distinguished Delegates,
Distinguished Honorees,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

The President of the General Assembly deeply regrets that he cannot be with us today, but he has asked me to read the following statement on his behalf.

On this day, 65 years ago, our United Nations General Assembly adopted one of the most important documents in world history - the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR). Let us take a moment to remember that a mere three years after the founding of the United Nations, the countries of the world came together to reaffirm their faith in universal human rights as a main pillar of the Organization and of human civilization as a whole.

In 1948, this inspirational and aspirational document became a road map for the then fledgling United Nations, affirming that basic rights and fundamental freedoms are inherent to all human beings- inalienable and equally applicable to everyone at all times. The UDHR transformed into reality the bold and audacious premise that all people – regardless of circumstance – are born free and equal in dignity and rights.

The far-reaching consequences of drafting such a document cannot be underestimated. It has been described by the Guinness Book of Records as [and I quote] “the world’s ‘Most Translated Document’” [end quote]. As of today, it has been translated into 416 languages and dialects. It transcends borders, has stood the test of time and remains a shining testament of the hope, vision and courage of those who worked tirelessly in its drafting and subsequent adoption. More importantly it continues to guide the hopes and dreams of millions living across the globe.

Excellencies,

The formation of the UDHR marks a proud moment for humankind and is an indicator of our highest and noblest aspirations. More than six decades later, we can celebrate the extent to which it has influenced, and continues to influence, both international and national laws, norms and standards. This document laid the foundation for a body of international human rights law, which defines our shared human experience and continues to evolve and expand today. Since its adoption, we have seen the development of a comprehensive and legally binding system for the promotion and protection of human rights through international human rights covenants. This system and other international and regional human rights instruments, institutions and mechanisms all operate with the core principles of universality, interdependence and indivisibility, equality and non-discrimination, as first set out in the UDHR.

But let us not forget that, the real power of such a document is in its implementation, and we should take note that when the UDHR is tarnished or when its principles are not upheld and implemented, we who comprise this Assembly of Nations are all diminished.

Distinguished Delegates,

Persistent violations of the principles of the Declaration are rampant. All too often, we have, as representatives of the 'People', failed to uphold and to adhere to the laws, norms and standards to which we have ascribed. We are still challenged in our efforts to address and to implement effectively the basic tenets of the Declaration. Around the world, we see that poor, vulnerable, marginalized populations and minorities are continually discriminated against based on race, gender, language, religion and socio-economic status. 65 years after the adoption of the UDHR, far too many people lack the right to a standard of living adequate for health and well-being. Too many suffer from persecution and are denied equal access to the law and recognition before the law. Too many women and children are still victims of human trafficking and contemporary forms of slavery and denied their basic right to liberty, security and dignity. These and other violations occur far too often, and we in the Assembly of Nations have an obligation- a duty really- to respond and take action. We cannot stand by idly or look away when we see oppression and discrimination. This is the essence of what it means to be part of one larger human family – we do not shy away in the face of injustice- instead we need to persevere and overcome.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

In 1993, delegations gathered in Vienna, Austria for the World Conference on Human Rights, and they adopted the Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action by consensus. It marked a collective decision to renew and strengthen the international community's commitment to the promotion and protection of human rights. One of the concrete recommendations of the Conference was to establish the mandate of a High Commissioner for Human Rights, and thereby strengthen and harmonize the human rights monitoring capacity of the United Nations.

As we celebrate this year's theme - *'20 years – Working for Your Rights'* - I'd like to congratulate and extend my appreciation to Madam Pillay and to previous Commissioners and their respective offices, for their dedication and commitment in:

- Responding to human rights challenges across the globe,
- Ensuring that human rights are mainstreamed and mutually reinforced in all United Nations programmes ; and
- Developing partnerships with relevant stakeholders, including UN entities, Governments and civil society.

I also commend the Office for providing a forum for the voices of victims and survivors of human rights abuses and violations throughout the world. Despite the challenge of persistent budgetary and human resources constraints, the Office continues to work in a reliable and effective manner.

In the 65 years since the signing of the Declaration, the world has seen many champions of human rights, some of whom have passed on and others of whom are still with us. These icons, by their example have lived the principles of the Declaration and sought to ensure the freedoms and dignity of the world's people.

In that spirit, let us acknowledge the legacy and work of President Nelson Mandela. Affectionately known as Madiba- his life was dedicated to the advancement of human rights, dignity and freedom and while we mourn his loss, we cannot fail to learn by his example. In 1988, Nelson Mandela, along with his former wife Winnie Mandela, were recipients of the very human rights prize being awarded today.

Mandela taught us that there can be no true development unless all people have access to equal human rights, democracy, dignity, and freedom. Today we salute all those who have worked and sacrificed for these ideals

Excellencies,

We are gathered to honor the virtue of courage, for at the heels of every human rights violation is a human rights defender working tirelessly for justice, dignity and decency.

The winners of the 2013 UN prize in the field of human rights have all made outstanding contributions to the promotion and protection of economic, social, cultural, civil, and political rights and the right to development in their respective countries. They have helped identify where action is needed; ensure that the voices of victims of human rights violations are heard; and they fight against impunity.

The efforts of these individuals and institution not only have direct impact on the situations at hand but indirectly, they serve as voices of social conscience; they inspire us and set an example; and they put violators of human rights at notice – that their abuses will not be tolerated or ignored.

We applaud this year's winners – their personal courage and their collective contributions to better our human family. It is my distinct privilege to honor their dedication to human rights and fundamental freedoms for all, and in doing so to thank them for their service to humanity.

Thank you.