

10 December 2003

**Statement of H.E. Mr. Julian Robert Hunte,
President of the 58th Session of the General Assembly,
on the Occasion of Human Rights Day**

Today is Human Rights Day. Yet on this Day when we celebrate our entitlement to human rights and fundamental freedoms, countless incidence of human right abuses will occur around the world.

On Human Rights Day, civilians will continue to be targeted in war and conflict; refugees and displaced persons will continue to number in the millions; violence against women and children will remain pervasive; human beings will continue to be trafficked into prostitution and slavery; people will continue to be subjected to torture and arbitrary detention; religious intolerance will continue to be a fact of life for many; countries and regions will continue to be ravaged by deadly disease such as HIV/AIDS; and inequalities in the global economic system will continue to subject hundreds of millions to poverty and misery, particularly in the developing world.

Grave human rights problems, however, must not hinder us, on this Human Rights Day, from celebrating the progress we have made. For indeed it is a day of special significance for the people of the world. On this day in 1948, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights proclaimed the rights of all humankind, and became the centerpiece of our human rights endeavours. It was, then as now, a noble vision and beacon of hope, calling nations, societies and individuals to work towards the common goal of enjoyment of civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights, by all.

Having as a firm foundation the rights enshrined in the Declaration, the obligations arising from the Human Rights Covenants, other international and regional human rights instruments and institutions and mechanisms, we have made important progress in the field of human rights. The inalienable right of all peoples to the full range of human rights, including freedom, equality, dignity, social justice, self-determination and the right to be democratically governed, is today unquestionable. Anyone that violate these rights must know that they cannot expect to do so with impunity.

If there is a group to which I would make particular reference on this Human Rights Day, it is children, our future and our best hope for a world in which human rights and fundamental freedoms will be fully respected, and protected. Children's rights are set out in the International Convention on the Rights of the Child. We must live up to these standards to provide decent life-chances for every child, even as we promote among children the ideals of human rights and fundamental freedoms.

If we are to build a universal culture of human rights - and I believe that we must - we must begin with children. Human rights education must be an integral part of children's education. Learning, however, is a lifetime process, including learning to live together in peace. The time has come, therefore, to include human rights education in the curricula of our primary and secondary schools, and in all our institutions of learning. For it is through human rights education that we will inculcate and reinforce the respect, tolerance and friendship that will ensure the realization and protection of human rights across the globe.

To live up to the commitments to promote and protect human rights and fundamental freedoms, however, requires us to do much more. We must commit ourselves to upholding the ideals of the United Nations Charter and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. We must implement human rights instruments and standards through our parliaments, the courts, and national human rights institutions.

Importantly, we must act decisively on the full range of issues impacting the enjoyment of human rights and fundamental freedoms today. The United Nations and the international community as a whole are challenged to devise solutions to seemingly intractable conflicts and war, which always result massive violations of human rights. We must strive for a more equitable global economic system, so as to eradicate poverty and hunger. We must cooperate in confronting grave pandemics such as HIV/AIDS. And we must be particularly vigilant in respect of the rights of vulnerable groups, including women, children, older persons and people with disabilities.

The exemplary persons and organizations who are today's Awardees of the 2003 Human Rights Awards, given on the occasion of the fifty-fifth Anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, are strong advocates for international cooperation for the promotion and protection of human rights. But today's six Awardees, among them the very respected and late Sergio Viera de Mello, have been much more. They have been people of action, and strong defenders of the rights of humankind, whether it relates to disabilities, peace and security or the equality of men and women. They come from all parts of the world. They encourage and inspire us, both with their words and deeds.

It is my pleasure to commend and pay tribute to the Awardees on this Human Rights Day, the Day that affords us the opportunity to recommit ourselves to building a world in accord with the vision Universal Declaration on Human Rights. We must embrace this opportunity for the mobilization of conscience around the Declaration and the international human rights instruments; to renewing our pledge to fight injustices and gross violations of human rights, wherever they occur; and to strengthen our resolve to intensify international cooperation for the universal enjoyment of human rights and fundamental freedoms.

I thank you.