

25 February 2013

**Statement of H.E. Mr. Vuk Jeremić,
President of the 67th Session of the General Assembly,
at the Opening of the High Level Segment of the 22nd Regular Session
of the Human Rights Council**

Ms. High Commissioner,
Mr. President of the Council,
Excellencies,
Distinguished Delegates,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am honored to be here with you today in Geneva at the opening of the High Level Segment of the 22nd Regular Session of the Human Rights Council, established as a subsidiary body of the General Assembly by resolution 60/251.

One of my most notable predecessors as President and the UN's current Deputy Secretary-General, Mr. Jan Eliasson of Sweden spoke on that historic day about the guiding principles of its work, which he identified as "universality, impartiality, objectivity and non-selectivity, constructive international dialogue, and cooperation."

Over the course of the last seven years, the Council has become the central meeting ground for UN Member States to articulate their respective positions on human rights.

As President of the General Assembly, I greatly support the Council's work. At the same time, I believe we must continue redressing its shortcomings, as we strive to remain attentive to various sensitivities that are often involved.

In the time ahead, the Council's credibility will undoubtedly rest on its ability to respond to alleged human rights violations in an even-handed and impartial manner.

We are fortunate to have in place instruments that, when properly utilized, provide a framework for effective action. Here let me emphasize the role that the special procedures and Rapporteurs can play, but also that of the Universal Periodic Review, which has now entered its second cycle.

Excellencies,

When authors of the Universal Declaration proclaimed a "common standard of achievement for all peoples and all nations," they made it clear that human rights are inalienable, everywhere and for everyone.

Sixty-five years after that great document was adopted by the General Assembly, the proposition that “all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights” has become a fundamental tenet of humanity.

It serves as a constant font of strength and endurance for individuals across the globe a sturdy foundation upon which to build a world where every person in every country has the opportunity to live up to his or her potential.

Excellencies,

Since the 67th Session began its work in late September, the General Assembly has been working hard on strengthening the Human Rights Treaty Body System an integral part of the international human rights protection framework.

I have reappointed Iceland and Indonesia as co-facilitators in this process. They have proposed a series of events that will help advance inter-governmental negotiations on how to improve the effective functioning of the System. A number of meetings with Member States have been scheduled, as have several interactive hearings with representatives of think tanks and civil society.

On the eve of last September’s General Debate, a historic High Level Meeting on the Rule of Law took place in the General Assembly. It was the first time this critical issue was thematically discussed by Heads of State and Government at the United Nations.

The Outcome Document which was adopted recognizes the “importance of national ownership in rule of law activities,” affirming that the juridical corpus of a country stands at the heart of the social contract between a state and its citizens. The broad diversity of legal traditions was brought together in the Document by acknowledging that there are “common features founded on international norms and standards,” including those related to human rights. Throughout the debate, many Member States underscored the fact that regard for accepted international human rights specifications cannot be ambiguous or selective, and that governments must protect them without exception.

During the main part of the 67th Session, the General Assembly also adopted resolutions to strengthen adherence to women’s and children’s rights.

In addition, the plenary agreed on a consensus text that appeals on Member States to combat religious discrimination and criminalize incitement to violence against individuals on the basis of their faith.

Moreover, the General Assembly unanimously adopted a resolution on freedom of religion or belief. It recognized with deep concern the growing number of hate crimes motivated by Islamophobia, anti-Semitism and Christianophobia.

Excellencies,

In order to comprehensively address the question of human rights, I believe that narrowly focusing on civil and political ones is insufficient. We must devote increased attention to economic, social and cultural rights including the fundamental right to development.

It is an affront to the conscience of man that millions of people still struggle against poverty, hunger and disease that inadequate education and healthcare is an everyday reality for so many.

That is why working to fulfill the Millennium Development Goals must remain at the core of our shared vision for a more prosperous, peaceful and equitable world.

At the same time, we must focus on the post-2015 agenda.

The General Assembly was given the responsibility by world leaders last June in Rio to adopt the Sustainable Development Goals. In a few weeks, the plenary's Open Working Group tasked with defining the SDGs will begin its deliberations.

I will closely engage with the Member States to ensure that the SDG process becomes our top priority. By putting the work of this Group at the very center of the General Assembly's attention, we can ensure that the post-2015 development agenda and the promotion of human rights come to be seen as inseparable parts of the same whole.

Excellencies,

The Universal Declaration defined human rights as the "foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world."

It is in this context that I wish to underline my grave concern at the perpetuation of the most horrific humanitarian tragedy of our times the bloodbath of Syria.

New allegations of human rights abuses are reported daily, with official UN statistics putting the estimated death toll at over 70,000. Most of these casualties are believed to be civilians. The UNHCR has registered close to 800,000 Syrians as refugees, and it appears that an even greater number have been internally displaced. Moreover, it is estimated that around twenty percent of the population lack access to fuel, electricity, a telephone line, and a reliable source of food and water.

For close to two years, the international community has failed to put a stop to the carnage.

The immediate cessation of hostilities should be our foremost priority. It has to be followed by a political process that would enable the citizens of Syria to freely determine the course of their political future.

There is a manifest danger that the violence will simply be allowed to run its course a scenario that would continue to disproportionately affect the civilian population.

As President of the General Assembly, I extend a humanitarian appeal to all sides in the Syrian civil war to bring the fighting to an immediate end.

Excellencies,

Regrettably, our world is still characterized by too much confrontation, intolerance, and recurring warfare.

However, more than ever before, it is informed by the precepts of justice, as various impediments that once prevented people from enjoying their human rights keep falling by the wayside.

As our deliberations in Geneva begin in earnest, let us remind ourselves of how Winston Churchill defined the victory over fascism a great triumph that brought about the creation of the United Nations and the adoption of the Universal Declaration. He called it “a victory of an idea founded on the right of the common man, on the dignity of the human being, and on the conception of the State as the servant, not the master, of the people.”

Such is the bequest we have been called upon by our predecessors to keep in trust to maintain, preserve, and most importantly, improve upon: to keep at bay the dark and deadly designs of all who seek to control and oppress, so as to usurp the hard-fought gains of mankind in the unfinished quest to establish an international system that aspires at the enthronement of human rights.

Thank you for your attention.