

**THE SECRETARY-GENERAL****MESSAGE TO MARK THE INTERNATIONAL DAY
FOR THE ELIMINATION OF VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN****25 November 2003**

The International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women is a call to action on behalf of countless women around the world whose daily lives are marred by violence and abuse. Gender-based violence is perhaps the most shameful human rights violation. As long as it continues, we cannot claim to be making real progress towards equality, development and peace.

This age-old scourge is taking on new dimensions in the 21st century. One of the most alarming is trafficking in women and girls -- one of the fastest-growing types of organized crime in the world. It is estimated that more than 700,000 people are trafficked each year for sexual exploitation. Many of them are subjected to violence; all of them are subjected to human rights abuses.

An equal challenge is the growing violence against women and girls in armed conflict. In today's conflicts, women and girls are not only the victims of hardship, displacement and warfare. Increasingly, they are directly and deliberately targeted, with rape and sexual violence used as weapons of war.

These old and new forms of violence against women are not only urgent challenges in themselves; they all come with an added, deadly, dimension – the risk of HIV/AIDS infection. Violence, abuse and intimidation often make it impossible for women to protect themselves from the virus; from seeking information, counselling and testing; from demanding to know their partner's HIV status, or disclosing their own; from staying the course of prescribed medical treatment. This added risk of HIV transmission renders even more pressing our mission to fight violence against women in all its forms.

In the past year, there have been encouraging signs of growing awareness and understanding of the problem. We are also seeing the emergence of new tools and mechanisms to help us take more effective action against it. The Protocol to the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime, which aims to eliminate trafficking in persons, especially women and children, enters into force in December 2003. In July, the African Union adopted a Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa. The Protocol calls on States

parties to take measures to ensure the prevention, punishment and eradication of all forms of violence, and specifically addresses harmful practices. The number of States parties to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women grew to 174, while the number of States parties to its Optional Protocol now stands at 57. And in an historic election, seven women judges were elected to the International Criminal Court – one third of the total.

I call on all States who have not yet done so to adopt the Optional Protocol, and to take more vigorous action to enforce laws against trafficking and violence. And I call on all sectors of society to redouble their efforts to achieve the objective of ending all forms of violence against women. This will require leadership at every level, in every culture, country and continent. It will require a bold transformation in men's attitudes and behaviour so that women become their equal partners. It will require changes in oppressive laws, practices, and institutions. It will require us to speak up, and to make clear that when it comes to violence against women, there are no grounds for tolerance and no tolerable excuses. On this fourth International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women, let us ensure that message is heard loud and clear -- including by those who need to hear it most.