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Human Rights Council Commemorative Session on the Occasion of the 60th Anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights

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Mr. Secretary-General, Madam High Commissioner, Mr. President, Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen

In the six decades since adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, there have been many significant gains in the promotion and protection of human rights. There is a rich tapestry of international, regional and national human rights standards, and a multitude of institutions to give effect to those standards. To a degree unimaginable in 1948, there is now a vibrant civil society committed to human rights. The equality of men and women and persons of different colour, the rights of children, a free press and a fair judicial system are no longer disputed concepts; they are widely accepted standards that many countries have achieved and to which others aspire.

The greatest achievement of the UDHR is that human rights have become firmly entrenched in the collective conscience of humanity. Human rights today are the benchmark by which the behaviour of governments is judged.

However, this is not the time to rest on laurels. As we celebrate successes, we must also acknowledge the human rights failures and the challenges that need to be addressed. The gap between the promise of the UDHR and the reality of humanity's experiences is huge. Injustice, inequality and impunity remain hallmarks of our world today.

Among the most visible human rights violations are those in the context of armed conflict, and state repression. Where do we find these challenges? There is no need to name names, you just need to turn on your television sets or look at newspapers.

The recent attack in Mumbai has reminded us all of the vulnerability of human rights in the face of terrorism. Amnesty International condemns terrorist attacks in the strongest possible terms. Governments have duty to protect people against such attacks but they must do so within the framework of human rights and not at its expense. To erode our freedoms in the name of security is to hand victory to the terrorists.

These are the more visible human rights abuses. There are also many that do not attract media attention.

Among them is rampant discrimination on the basis of race, religion, sexual orientation and other forms of identity and opinion. Among those hidden human rights scandals is violence against women and girls in the home, the workplace and schools, in times of peace as well as war. Rape has shamefully become a weapon of war in many conflicts. There is an urgent need to make rights real for women and girls.

The biggest human rights crisis right now is poverty which affects billions of people in the world. In the current economic climate there is a real risk that millions more could be pushed back into poverty. The poorest and the most vulnerable are paying the price of the greed of the rich and powerful.

The gift of the UDHR is universality and indivisibility. Human rights are universal – every person is born free and equal in dignity and rights. Human rights are indivisible – all rights, whether civil, cultural, economic, political or social – are equally important. There is no hierarchy of rights. Wednesday's adoption of the Optional Protocol to the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights marks a highly symbolic and eminently practical reaffirmation of the indivisibility and universality of rights. This Council played an important role in developing the Protocol.

We encourage this Council to ensure that human rights are central to the realization of the Millennium Development Goals. The panel discussion on maternal mortality and women's human rights at the Council session in June was a significant event. However, despite the promise of universal primary education six decades ago, several generations of young girls and boys have had their dreams deferred. This Council must insist that the promises of the Universal Declaration, which made no distinction between civil and political rights and economic, social and cultural rights, are fulfilled.

International human rights are a unique responsibility of the United Nations. This Council, as the UN's premier organization for human rights, has a fundamental role to play as the moral voice of the international community. It must address human rights violations forcefully, clearly and consistently. For this to happen, however, all member states must play their part fully. There is no room in human rights for spectators. We call on governments, especially those with influence, to unite the Council in concrete action to make human rights effective on the ground.

Mr President,

Around of world millions of people are marking the 60th anniversary. In this room this morning a group of children brought their voices to the demand for human rights. In ten years time, what will they say of the legacy we are creating now?

In 1948, in the face of enormous challenges, world leaders showed courage in their farsighted vision of the UDHR. Today's leaders must show courage and determination in action.

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