

Press Release



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UN SECRETARY-GENERAL TO COMMISSION ON HUMAN RIGHTS: WE MUST HOPE A NEW ERA OF HUMAN RIGHTS IN IRAQ WILL BEGIN NOW

Following is the statement of United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan which he delivered today at the Commission of Human Rights at the Palais des Nations in Geneva:

"Your session this year has coincided with dramatic events on the world stage. In the past few weeks, we have witnessed, often in real time, scenes so vivid that they will live in our memories for the rest of our lives. War invariably brings with it suffering. It brings loss of life, surely the most basic of all human rights. We mourn especially the loss of innocent civilian life.

But whatever view we may take of the war in Iraq, it is right to acknowledge that we have also witnessed scenes of jubilation at the fall of an oppressive regime. They remind us that as you yourself said, High Commissioner, on 27 March the human rights crisis in Iraq did not begin with this war.

What we must all hope is that a new era of human rights in Iraq will now begin, with the end of the war. And here, in the first instance, I hope the Coalition will set an example by making clear that they intend to act strictly within the rules set down by the Geneva Conventions and the Hague Regulations regarding the treatment of prisoners of war, and by demonstrating through their actions that they accept the responsibilities of the Occupying Power for public order and safety, and the well-being of the civilian population.

The decision to go to war without specific authorization by the Security Council has created deep divisions that will need to be bridged if we are to deal effectively, not just with the aftermath in Iraq, but with other major challenges on the international agenda. The threats to international peace and security of which we have become so much more acutely conscious in the last few years may require a searching review of the adequacy of existing instruments, with a view to coming up with a collective response.

I say collective response because I believe and remain as convinced as ever that we are all safer the large and powerful as much as the small and the weak in a system where all are governed by the international rule of law and principles set out in the United Nations Charter.

But let us not allow events in Iraq to distract us from what is happening in other parts of the world. There are many places where violence, chaos, oppression and the violation of human rights have intensified in the last few weeks and months.

The Ituri region in the Democratic Republic of Congo, where hundreds of people have been butchered

in cold blood within the last few weeks, is only the most flagrant of these cases. The perpetrators may have hoped that their crimes would escape international notice, at a time when all eyes were focused on Iraq. They counted on the world's silence, born of neglect and indifference. Let us deny them that today, and in the months and years ahead.

We are living through a time of global tensions and division, a time when states and peoples around the world are witnessing great upheavals in the global system, and in their own lives. War, terror and the threat of political violence have become a much greater part of many peoples' lives. Their human rights are under siege, their fundamental sense of security shaken. While some are concerned that human rights may fall victim to the dictates of security, others fear that focusing on violations in one or two places will be at the price of ignoring equally egregious breaches elsewhere. While some wish to focus on civil and political rights, others would like to see equal attention paid to economic, social and cultural rights, complaining bitterly that the right to vote is worth little if their children are hungry and do not have access to safe water.

This is a time when your mission to promote and protect human rights in the widest sense is more important than ever, your responsibility to act more urgent. And yet, divisions and disputes in recent months have made your voice not stronger, but weaker; your voice in the great debates about human rights more muffled, not clearer.

This must change, if you are to play the role intended for this Commission, and if the cause of human rights is to be advanced in the broad and universal manner that we all desire. Inaction is not an option. The Commission must take a proactive approach if the wider agenda for human rights is to be realized, everywhere.

The global debate today is too often framed in terms of regret and reproach, mistrust and misunderstanding. Consensus is becoming increasingly difficult to obtain on a broad range of world issues – from disarmament to conflict resolution to the environment. Yet I believe that your cause – the promotion of human rights – has the potential to unite far more than divide, to create a broad alliance for progress regardless of faith, ethnicity or national origin.

Human rights – whether they be civil, political, economic, social or cultural -- are universal, and by forging unity and determination in their defence, you can set an example of common progress for the broader international community.

I do not wish to suggest that the divisions we face are not serious. But I do believe that the cause of human rights has the potential to bridge those divisions and restore a sense of common purpose among states and nations.

Who would deny that all men and women would rather live in freedom? Who would deny that all people have the right to primary education, clean water, and health? Who would deny the yearning of girls and women for equal rights, equal treatment and equal opportunities? Who would claim that any people would prefer tyranny, or autocracy to pluralism and a representative government under the rule of law?

We have to acknowledge that there are differences of opinion – held with conviction on both sides – on the manner, the pace and the scope of the effort to achieve human rights for all. What we do agree on is that human rights are universal and indivisible, and must be upheld with equal determination in every country. And that means looking beyond cultural differences -- to recognize, for example, that the rights of women on one continent are the rights of women on every continent.

There is an entire edifice of international humanitarian law and human rights law, which has

contributed immeasurably to the alleviation of suffering. This edifice can and must be strengthened, in the name of every man and woman whose rights are still denied.

Yet if we are to strengthen it, our discourse must change. We cannot achieve universal aims if we perpetuate divisions among states around the world, or here in this Commission. What is a shared yearning must be pursued as such. This requires an open discussion of difficult issues, treating all countries equally. The rules and systems of international bodies like the Commission should be applied equally and fairly to all states. Membership in this Commission implies responsibilities as well as privileges. If you do not stand up for human rights equally and universally, who will?

That also means that each country must pay attention, first and foremost, to the strengthening of its national protection system. It is at home that human rights must be protected and promoted in the first instance.

Any State that criticizes others for their approach to human rights should be sure that its own protection system is as effective as possible, and be willing to expose it to international scrutiny. The High Commissioner will be initiating a process by which states can learn from each other's experiences. I welcome this initiative.

Each country, and the Commission as a whole, must likewise sharpen the focus on monitoring and advancing human rights at the country level. The Commission can do this through greater support for the work of the Commission's Special Procedures. Here, of course, I refer to the special rapporteurs, independent experts, working groups and special representatives. The achievements of these procedures are, in many cases, remarkable, and should be built on.

Allow me in closing to return to a core principle that I have addressed in this forum and others over the past few years: the idea that gross violations of human rights must not be allowed to stand. And this responsibility must be exercised equally and universally, whether the violators are rich or poor, strong or weak, developed or developing.

When we speak of human rights, we must never forget that we are labouring to save the individual man, woman or child from violence, abuse and injustice. Freedom from want and freedom from fear must go hand in hand. It is that perspective—the individual's—which must guide your work, and not the point of view of contesting states. At the same time, we all recognize that for the individual's rights to be secured, states must act. You, who are gathered here in this hall, must work to make these rights a reality for every citizen of every nation."

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