



Mission permanente d'Israël
auprès de l'Office des Nations Unies
et des Organisations Internationales à Genève

משלחת ישראל
ליד משרד האומות המאוחדות
והארגונים הבינלאומיים בג'נבה

**High Level Segment of the
61st United Nations Commission on Human Rights
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Madam High Commissioner, Mr. Chairman, distinguished colleagues,

I would like to begin by offering my congratulations to Dr. Makarim Wibisono, Indonesia's Permanent Representative here in Geneva, upon his election as Chairman of this year's session. I am hopeful that your leadership will guide us towards an open and balanced dialogue, collaboration and a productive session.

The history of the Jewish people has brought us into close and personal contact with many of the crucial issues that this Commission is called to address – slavery, hunger, discrimination, persecution, and liberation. And every time the response of the Jewish tradition has been the same – not to seek to forget or sublimate the suffering, but to remember and preserve it so that we can be in the forefront of fighting these evils in the future.

The twentieth century has given the Jewish people another commandment – not to forget. Not to forget the unspeakable atrocities of the Shoah, the Holocaust. A campaign of racial hatred and genocide that began with hate speech and incitement, and ended with the murder of one third of the Jewish people.

On Tuesday this week, in Jerusalem the new "Yad Vashem", Israel's Holocaust Museum was inaugurated. At the inauguration ceremony, U.N Secretary General Mr. Kofi Annan, declared that:

"A United Nations that fails to be at the forefront of the fight against anti-Semitism and other forms of racism denies its history and undermines its future."

He added:

"That obligation binds us to the Jewish people, and to the State of Israel, which rose, like the United Nations itself, from the ashes of the Holocaust."

These words of the Secretary General should guide us in combating Antisemitism, racial discrimination and defamation of religions.

Last year, this body included a rejection of Antisemitism within a few of its resolutions. That was an important step to counter this severe threat. Events of the past year have emphasized the connection between the horrors of the Holocaust and the founding of the United Nations. Most notably, the 28th Special Session of the General Assembly commemorating the 60th Anniversary of the liberation of the Nazi Concentration Camps which took place in New York on 24 January 2005. An exhibition entitled "*Auschwitz – the Depth of the Abyss*", created by Yad Vashem, which was shown at the United Nations in New York in conjunction with the Special Session, will open here at UN Headquarters in Geneva on the 5th of April. I urge you all to visit.

Similarly vital and heartening was the Berlin Declaration against Antisemitism of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe of 29 April 2004, which included a series of binding commitments for member states to take action through the collection of data on anti-Semitic incidents and the promotion of educational initiatives to counteract anti-Jewish sentiment, prejudice and bigotry. This body must take upon itself the messages of these events and make their words and lessons part of the dialogue here at the Human Rights Commission.

Mr. Chairman,

This session of the Commission will be a crucial one in determining whether this body will be relevant to the advancement of human rights in years to come. It has become increasingly widely recognized that the Commission has fallen far short of its mission. The recent Report of the Secretary-General's High Level Panel stated the plain truth when it noted:

"In recent years, the Commission's capacity to perform [its] tasks has been undermined by eroding credibility and professionalism... The Commission cannot be credible if it is seen to be maintaining double standards in addressing human rights concerns."

These double standards, which are so damaging to the credibility of the Commission, are nowhere clearer than in its treatment of Israel and the Middle East. Can there really be any justification for treating every country situation under one agenda item, and having a separate agenda item for one country alone? What excuse can there be for appointing a Special Rapporteur with an open-ended mandate to examine one side of a conflict but not the other? Or for the repeated anachronistic resolutions that ignore positive developments in the region, and come back to tarnish the work of this Commission year after year?

International human rights organizations, like Amnesty International, and recently, Human Rights Watch, have voiced their concerns in this regard. Human Rights Watch stated on March 10th:

"The Commission traditionally neglects or downplays abuses by Palestinian armed groups. That selectivity should end. The Commission should condemn Palestinian armed groups for their deliberate and indiscriminate attacks on civilians and call on the newly elected Palestinian Authority to undertake all efforts consistent with international human rights standards to curb these attacks."

If the Commission truly hopes to have any impact on ending discrimination and prejudice in the world, it cannot avoid addressing these failings in its own back yard.

Mr. Chairman,

Recent events in the Middle East have offered some real hope for progress. A window of opportunity has opened for Israelis, for Palestinians and for all people of good faith interested in seeing improvements in the region. This could mean the first steps towards the Roadmap, the internationally recognized plan for the end of violence, renewing dialogue and cooperation between Israel and the Palestinians leading towards the vision of two states – Israel and Palestine – living side by side in peace and security.

This spirit of hope, opportunity, and some risk was described by Prime Minister Ariel Sharon last month in Sharm el-Sheikh:

"2005 began as a year of great opportunity for all the peoples of the region, first and foremost for Israelis and Palestinians. We must all ensure that this opportunity is not missed... For the first time in a long time, there exists in our region hope for a better future for our children and grandchildren... This is a very fragile opportunity, that the extremists will want to exploit... If we do not act now – they may be successful in their scheme."

This spirit is more than making political statements. It is facing the difficult dilemmas that arise during times of conflict and strife. It is a leadership that makes painful decisions that will improve the lives of its people and their neighbors. It is a judiciary that seeks to balance, in the most difficult times, the need to protect human lives with the humanitarian and human rights concerns of all residents in the region. It is a legal system that is open to all individuals and groups that might be affected by government authorities. It is a self-questioning system that has a deeply integrated rule of law and checks and balances. And perhaps most importantly, it is the striving for peace, security and coexistence.

In recent months, Israel has initiated a significant number of steps to improve the situation for Israelis and Palestinians alike. The most significant such endeavor is Prime Minister Sharon's Disengagement Initiative, removing Israeli military and civilian presence from the Gaza Strip and the northern West Bank. Along with this initiative, Israel has taken significant steps to ease restrictions upon the Palestinian population in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip and to build confidence. For example, hundreds of workers and merchants cross daily from Gaza via the Erez Crossing into Israel. Hundreds of convicted prisoners have been released. During January's Palestinian elections, the UN described the Israeli authorities as "highly professional, responsive and sincere in their efforts to facilitate the task of the international electoral observers".

At this unique and sensitive time in relations between Israel and the Palestinians, it is crucial that we act responsibly by encouraging and strengthening this positive process, to ensure that the reality in the region is reflected in the work of the commission.

Mr. Chairman,

Israel, as a homeland to survivors of persecution, has an inherent deep respect for human rights. In Hebrew the term for human rights is "z'chuyot Adam", literally "the rights of Adam". The reference to Adam is significant – a reminder that we all have a common ancestor. According to Jewish tradition, the fact that all mankind are descended from a single individual comes to remind us of a lesson that must lie at the heart of our deliberations: we are all brothers and sisters; we must all be treated equally, for all of us, irrespective of race, religion or gender, are created in the divine image.

Thank you