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S T A T E M E N T

BY

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DEPUTY MINISTER OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS
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AT THE HIGH LEVEL SEGMENT DURING
THE 61ST SESSION
OF THE UN COMMISSION ON HUMAN RIGHTS

Geneva, 17 March 2005

Mr. Chairman,
 Madam High Commissioner,
 Ladies and Gentlemen,

The present session of the Commission on Human Rights is being held during the year when we celebrate the sixtieth anniversary of the United Nations. Sixty years ago in San Francisco States which called themselves the United Nations signed the UN Charter, which has become the most fundamental international legal document of the twentieth century.

The founders of the UN Organization were firmly resolved not to allow the repetition of the horrors of the World War II. Complete disrespect for human rights and values of humanity – these were the features of the politics of fascism. It was precisely for this reason that the protection of human rights and assistance to development of international cooperation in this sphere were stipulated in the UN Charter as one of the principle objectives of the Organization.

The past sixty years have witnessed the adoption of many human rights instruments both at the universal and regional levels, including those of a binding nature. A system of international bodies and monitoring mechanisms has been created.

Unfortunately, this complex and, of course, extremely indispensable system at times fails. As a result the ones who suffer are people who were presumed to be its main beneficiaries. Our common task is to take measures necessary for its effective and well coordinated functioning, and what is most important - to ensure that it reacts adequately to contemporary threats and challenges in the field of promotion and protection of human rights and freedoms.

With this in mind we consider the report prepared by the High-Level Panel on Threats, Challenges and Changes, including the recommendations related to the reform of the UN human rights activities, as an extremely timely and useful document. Russia supports and adheres to the goal stipulated in the report – to raise the authority of the Commission on Human Rights by eliminating double standards while solving human rights problems. This completely coincides with the priorities of Russia in the context of UN activity in this field.

It is likely to presume that not all of the recommendations contained in the High-Level Panel report can be implemented in the nearest future. Some of them are subject to discussion. However, the report's value does not lie in the possibility of instantaneous implementation of its provisions. What matters more is that the report gave substantial food for thought and strengthened the interest of the international community for the task of consolidating and improving the effectiveness of UN human rights bodies and mechanisms, and - in substance - for the realization of one of the principal statutory goals of the Organization.

Mr. Chairman,

The past year has demonstrated that the international community has no right to underestimate the threat of terrorism to human rights.

The relevant provisions of the Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action adopted ten years ago at the World Conference on Human Rights have not lost their significance, and namely that “the acts, methods and practices of terrorism in all its forms and manifestations...are activities aimed at the destruction of human rights, fundamental freedoms and democracy, threatening territorial integrity and security of States and destabilizing legitimately constituted Governments”.

We declared on many occasions that Russia is ready and determined to develop and strengthen inter-state cooperation in the area of counter-terrorism, including in its human rights aspect. One of the concrete and noticeable steps in this direction was the adoption at the last session of the UN General Assembly of the resolution “Human Rights and Terrorism” that was initiated by Russia.

Russia stands for an uncompromising and firm fight against any form and manifestation of terrorism. Any attempts to make a distinction between "good" and "bad" terrorists while manipulating public opinion have a negative impact on the process of consolidating the international anti-terrorist coalition. Misuse of human rights rhetoric for justifying terrorists does not only contradicts legal, but also moral and ethic norms.

In light of the above one of the most acute problems is that of strengthening the asylum regime. It is no secret that in recent times refugee status has often been granted to persons who committed, planned, financed or were in any other way involved in carrying out terrorist acts. This is not just unacceptable. Granting asylum to such persons, refusing to extradite them to countries where they should be brought to justice is nothing less than complicity with terrorists.

We once again call upon States which granted refugee status or asylum to persons who planned, assisted or participated in terrorist acts, to review such decisions. We are convinced that declarations of political consideration must not be considered as a basis for refusal to extradite terrorists, as stated in UN General Assembly resolution 59/195.

We are convinced that it is, of course, necessary to observe the law and take into consideration human rights standards while countering terrorism.

Mr. Chairman,

We have to state that despite our efforts the provisions of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenants on Human Rights and other very important documents have not yet become a standard that guides States in their day-to-day politics.

We still hear that in one or another country human rights are being violated, occasionally on a massive scale. At times this happens in places which are considered to be relatively successful in terms of human rights protection. Discrimination of minorities, infringement of their rights, violation of basic principles of fair trial and other abuses – all of this constitutes a breeding environment and a source of new conflict situations. If such practice is not eliminated then the consequences might be extremely serious.

In this regard we are concerned about the absolutely inadequate humanitarian situation prevailing in Latvia and Estonia – States which have become members of the EU which has declared a relatively high level of observance of universally recognized international human rights standards. I would like to underline that neither Russia nor international experts ask for anything out of the ordinary from Latvia and Estonia. This has to do with the necessity by these States to observe basic human rights norms, in particular in the field of minority rights.

The most acute problem in these countries is the statelessness of more than 480 thousand inhabitants of Latvia and 162 thousand inhabitants of Estonia. Every second Russian-speaking person in these States has no citizenship. The right to nationality is a fundamental human right and is embodied in article 15 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Here we are facing a blatant violation of a universal international standard. We stress that this concerns not foreigners but people who were residents of Latvia for their whole life or its major part.

Massive statelessness among other factors continues to create a deficit of democracy. We call upon the Latvian authorities to implement as soon as possible the recommendations of international experts on the necessity of granting Latvian non citizens the right to vote at municipal elections. A right that is enjoyed by citizens of the European Union.

Another conflict situation in Latvia has to do with an active curtailment of high school education in the Russian language. The on-going educational reform in this country in practice provides for the elimination of the system of high school education in the Russian language which is native to 40 % of pupils in this country. We consider this process as clear evidence that the Latvian authorities are ignoring basic principles of democracy. Socially significant reforms are being prepared without consulting those whom they affect. Taking into account

Riga's complete lack of readiness for dialogue, there is nothing surprising about the fact that such an approach results in massive protests.

We called upon and continue to call upon the Latvian authorities to engage in a dialogue with representatives of the Russian-speaking community of Latvia in order to agree on such an educational reform option which would allow to preserve full-fledged education in Russian and provide for knowledge of the State language by the entire population. This is the approach which is accepted in democratic States.

Continuing reprisals against veterans, who fought against Nazis, give rise to our concern since they too do not promote social agreement either. Trials of veterans, rehabilitation and glorification of former members of "Waffen SS", attempts to rewrite the history of World War II are practices which fuel contemporary forms of racism and neonazism.

We believe that such an authoritative UN body as the Commission on Human Rights can not and should not be silent vis-a-vis this challenge to universally recognized human rights norms and standards.

Mr. Chairman,

In order to react adequately to contemporary challenges and threats in the sphere of human rights there is a need for a relevant international machinery. The task of improving the effectiveness of the Commission on Human Rights – the main UN human rights body – is all the more pressing. This is reflected in the report of High-Level Panel. We believe that this should be the main focus of the work of the Bureau of the 61st session the during inter-sessional period.

Some separate technical and organizational measures, though important, will not be sufficient. Changes should occur in the views of States, their attitude to the issue of international cooperation in the field of human rights. Only then the Commission will be in a position to fully realize its great but still undiscovered potential.

Thank you.