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**COMMISSION ON HUMAN RIGHTS  
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**STATEMENT**

**BY**

**MR BILL RAMMELL MP**

**MINISTER FOR INTERNATIONAL HUMAN RIGHTS**

**FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE, LONDON**

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**Check against Delivery**

## MR RAMMELL'S SPEECH TO CHR61, 16 MARCH 2005

- Let me open by congratulating you on your election, Mr Chair. The weeks ahead will be a challenge – but a worthwhile challenge. We wish you well in your tasks and you can count on our full cooperation.
- May I also take this opportunity to welcome Louise Arbour to her first Commission as High Commissioner. You have the UK's full support in carrying out your important mandate.
- This year, as the UN considers how to respond to the suggestions for reform and improvement of the UN made by the High Level Panel, and as we assess what progress the international community has made on the goals we set ourselves at the Millennium Summit, it is perhaps a fitting time for us also to stand back and remember why we are meeting here again this year.
- In one sense, it goes without saying. We at this Commission are here to protect and promote the human rights of the people of our own countries and around the world.
- But in another sense it seems all too easy to lose sight of this point. Too often this Commission opens itself to charges of politicisation and discord. Too often, regrettably, members of this Commission have seemed more focussed on averting action than on fulfilling its mandate to promote and protect human rights.
- The report by the High Level Panel seeks to address this with suggestions to improve this Commission's workings. This is not the place to go into the details of that report. But I believe the report does reflect the vital position human rights has in the work of the international community: not simply in terms of upholding international standards for their own sake, but also because of the importance of human rights to so many of our other goals: sustainable development, economic prosperity, security and peace.

- These are ambitious goals. But they are directly related to our work here. So if we care about these broader international goals, it is vital that we do our work here in a professional manner, and in accordance with the mandate of this body. We owe it to ourselves, and we owe it to the countries which we represent. But above all, we owe it to those whose rights we are here to uphold – those who, for whatever reason, find they are struggling to claim or enjoy their rights.
- Those who are unable freely to elect their leaders, who are subject to torture, who are unable or unwilling to express their views out of fear. Those who are exploited, who lack adequate access to health care, education or food for themselves or their children, or who are persecuted on grounds of their political or religious beliefs. Our job here is to ensure that the voiceless, those who are hungry, weak or oppressed, are given a voice. Our job is to reassure them that though they may be out of sight, locked away in some dark prison, they are not out of our minds.
- We also believe this Commission should be a forum for cooperation, in promoting and developing human rights standards, and in providing, where needed, assistance to individual countries who request it. Yet while there is always room for more standard setting, we must remember too that we have most of the tools we need in terms of legal instruments. Where we now need to focus our energies is on making them work: to implement those standards and achieve those aspirations.
- This means addressing those situations where people are suffering under regimes which have little respect for their rights, and are making no efforts to improve. Our first preference is always for cooperation rather than condemnation. We all share the objective of improving the situation on the ground. There are many examples where we have worked constructively and positively to do so – with Colombia, for example, where we have funded human rights training of the Colombian military and also funded human rights ombudsmen in rural areas.

- But if cooperation is withheld, and we at this Commission failed to address those situations, we would end up focussing only on those countries which are working to improve their records, are cooperating with the UN mechanisms and are making a conscious effort to do better, - while ignoring those who are making no such efforts and are continuing seriously and systematically to violate the rights of their citizens.
- The European Union will be addressing many of those situations in its activities and statements over the next few weeks. But I would particularly like to highlight the situation in Zimbabwe, where the past 4 years have been marred by systematic intimidation, violence and repression. The majority are suppressed by laws which target the rights of freedom of association and of expression. While some concessions are being made to improve the electoral environment before the 31 March event, the underlying situation is unchanged. Three of the last remaining internationally accredited journalists were hounded out on 11 February; the government closed the Weekly Times on 26 February . Those linked with the opposition continue to be intimidated and arrested. This is a regime determined to abuse basic freedoms and the rule of law to retain their power-base.
- I also think of my visit to North Korea last September. I was pleased that for the first time the North Koreans showed themselves ready to discuss human rights concerns. I was also heartened at the time when they agreed to consider further international engagement – through the head of our human rights department visiting and also through considering inviting the Special Representative. However, since then, no action has been taken, and I am concerned that this represents a backwards step.
- I also raised two cases in particular with the North Korean government. I spoke to them about the Reverend Kim Dong-Shik, a South Korean with a record of involvement in providing humanitarian aid to North Korea, who was reportedly abducted from Youngbyun in China to North Korea in January 2000. Although the North Korean government has denied this, South Korea has since arrested Kim's alleged kidnapper. I also raised the case of the Reverend Ahn Seung-Woon, a South

Korean reportedly abducted from China to the DPRK in July 1995. Since then he has been seen on North Korean television on at least two occasions. Yet he has apparently been unable to communicate with his wife and family in South Korea. The North Koreans told me that he had come to the DPRK of his own accord and was still alive. I asked that our Ambassador in Pyongyang be allowed to visit him to hear about the history of this case. We did not receive such permission and will continue to press for it.

- It is cases like these which gives the UK and its European Union partners enormous cause for concern. North Korea is widely considered to have one of the worst human rights records in the world. The increasing flow of refugees from the DPRK to the Republic of Korea increases the amount of information on abuses in the North, providing an increasingly coherent, credible and very alarming picture of a situation where arbitrary detention, use of the death penalty and political executions, torture, labour camps, extreme religious persecution, and sanatoria for “non-conformists” are widespread.
- These are examples of the kind of cases which it is this Commission’s duty to address.
- All this said, I must make clear that the UK itself does not pretend it is perfect. We are not. Neither we nor any other country can ever be complacent about its human rights record.
- But respect for human rights is not about pretending to be perfect. It is about taking scrutiny seriously, about being transparent about our strengths and weaknesses, and doing one’s best to remedy them. It is also about respecting the rule of law. An independent and effective judiciary is absolutely vital in helping states ensure the protection of the rights of their citizens. This can be further reinforced by the empowerment of non-judicial bodies to provide independent assessments of government performance.

- A good example of this is the issue of torture and the independent monitoring of detention facilities by national and international bodies. The UK is firmly committed to the absolute prohibition on torture, cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment. We were the third state to ratify the Optional Protocol to the UN Convention Against Torture, and we encourage other states to do likewise, so that it can enter into force as soon as possible.
- And of course the rule of law goes far beyond simply keeping our governments in check. It also is vital to creating an environment conducive to sustainable development, which in turn helps states progressively to advance the economic, social and cultural rights of their people.
- In this spirit, where we have been found wanting, such as over the allegations of abuses in Iraq, we have investigated, and the perpetrators have been punished. I should stress that over 65,000 British troops have served in Iraq: only 46 have so far been reported for offences and only 11 have so far been charged. But we do take these incidents extremely seriously, and consider it imperative to address them clearly and transparently when they occur.
- So, no-one is claiming we are perfect. But where we have been found wanting, remedial action has followed. We strive continuously to improve our record, just as we urge others to do the same.
- This is also consistent with our view that membership of the Commission on Human Rights brings with it certain responsibilities. Last year I set out a number of steps the UK had taken while a member of the Commission, to improve its national protection of human rights. To that I now add some clear commitments for the future:
  - We will co-operate fully with the Special Procedures of the Commission on Human Rights, and I here reiterate that any mechanisms requesting a visit to the

United Kingdom will be accepted. We urge all states, especially members of the CHR, to commit to do likewise.

- We also commit, when tabling Commission resolutions, to be guided purely by the Commission's primary purpose – to promote and protect human rights.
- As part of that, we commit not to table or vote for any no-action motions, but to consider all resolutions tabled by any country in this forum on their merits.
- This is the spirit in which we shall continue to approach our role within the Commission, and the basis on which I am pleased to announce we shall seek re-election in 2006.