

PROTECT HUMAN RIGHTS, PROTECT PLANET RIGHTS

A statement by

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at the launch of the

The United Nations Human Rights Council

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The Chair,
Your Excellencies
The Secretary General of the United Nations, Mr. Kofi Annan,
Honourable Ministers, Ambassadors and High Commissioners,
Distinguished Delegates, Ladies and Gentlemen

Allow me to thank you very much for the honour and privilege to address your Excellencies at this important and historic launch of the United Nations Human Rights Council.

I warmly congratulate all those who have worked tirelessly to bring the process to this stage. I wish to especially congratulate the United Nations Secretary General, Mr. Kofi Annan and indeed the entire United Nations with all its organs, for the vision and guidance in this process that saw the Commission transit to the UN Council of Human Rights. Allow me to also pay tribute to the many governments and organizations that endorsed the idea, the reform process and eventually approved the formation of the Council of Human Rights.

This is a historic milestone for the evolution of our respect for each other as human beings, and the willingness to allow each other to fulfil our potential in life. We come a long way from slavery, colonialism and apartheid. We can genuinely be proud.

I am very happy to be at this launch partly because I wanted to share with you the challenge that I feel the Norwegian Nobel Committee gave to the world in 2004, when it chose the environment as the field to honour that year.

The Nobel Peace Prize in 2004 was equally historic because it emphasized, for the first time, the need for the world: to rethink peace and security vis- a- vis the environment, to recognize the close linkage between sustainable management of resources, good governance and peace.

You will remember that some people wondered aloud, “what is the relationship between peace and trees or peace and the environment? That was the challenge! To

reflect and discover the linkage between our ability to maintain peace, and the way we govern ourselves and manage our limited resources. Unless we understood this linkage, we would continue to deal with symptoms of war and conflicts. Yet, the root cause of most conflicts, is the desire to access and control the limited resources on our planet earth. We find many justifications for our actions because we are not willing to say upfront what drives our willingness to violate the rights of other human beings. We often argue that our actions are for the good of our victims. We know better, what is good for them. Sometimes we many even claim that the divine have been in touch with us and has entrusted us with the power to decide the destiny of others.

Therefore, to pre-empt conflict we must consciously and deliberately manage resources more sustainably, responsibly and accountably. We also need to share these resources more equitably both at the national level and at the global level. The only way we can do so is if we practise good governance.

And what is good governance? Many of us would define good governance as inclusive and participatory democracy. But we know that the word democracy gets misused and misinterpreted by leaders, who will also wage war to force their version of democracy.

Perhaps for the most part we could agree that democratic space, should mean availability of freedoms such as the freedom of movement, of association, of expression and of accessing information; a form of governance in which the rule of law is respected, basic human rights are respected including the right to be heard, to eat, to receive education, to live in a clean and healthy environment. A governance in which there is a willingness to give space and a voice to the weak and the vulnerable in our societies, to allow a voice of the minority even while accepting the decision of the majority. To honour and respect diversity, which is a human heritage.

By good governance we mean, availability of justice and equity to all irrespective of race, religion, gender and any other parameters, which we use to discriminate and exclude those we do not like, those we wish to exploit, or those whose resources we want to access and control. In many conflict-ridden regions of the world, those resources are natural, and accessing them sometimes cause major environmental disasters for the human and other species.

We all know how difficult it is to control human nature, where the strong want to control the weak and take advantage of them. We have so many examples of the strong walking all over the weak. We also have many examples of the weak struggling to fight back to reclaim dignity, and self respect, and in the process committing its own excesses. They too argue the justification of violence.

Therefore, it is important that we have institutions like the United Nations, and organs such as the Human Rights Council, which can monitor the state of human rights in the world, and ensure that all are protected. With its higher and more active status, the Council should be an effective forum that will also encourage states to honour their pledges to protect, especially the rights of their citizens but also those who find themselves in their jurisdiction. This is necessary because even though human rights are guaranteed in many documents and national constitutions, many people still have their rights violated by those who should protect them. Also vulnerable are those that

states feel that they have no responsibility towards them or that nobody else should interfere with them (such as the internally displaced and those who are trafficked). They are tortured, denied many freedoms and excluded from sharing the national cake.

The challenge to all of us continues to be the lack of will to respect the rule of law and treat all people the same under the law. The old vices of greed, corruption, selfishness and blind pursuit for power and all the privileges that come with it, continue to be powerful forces, while the universal values of justice, integrity, compassion and love are sacrificed. It is comparatively much easier to agree on a forum like this among friends and colleagues. Much more difficult will be to agree with our partners in governance once we are back home to our countries, where we must invoke the articles we have adopted. Then we find ourselves hiding behind concepts like sovereignty, independence and our right to act in the name of our citizens and national interests. In those circumstances who will protect the perceived enemy? We hope that the UN Council of Human Rights will provide a refuge and hope.

It is at such time that we need an institution such as the Council. If it is supported and utilized it will serve to provide a deterrent for excesses that could be committed by the strong against the weak, the majority against the minority and vice versa. It could also soften the forces driven by religion and other ideologies. Such an institution could also provide an effective forum for collective action against those who would violate human rights and serve as neutral grounds for the promotion of cultures of peace characterized by the spirit of forgiveness, a willingness to listen to others, to dialogue, to encourage healing and reconciliation.

Such a Council should serve to restrain strong nations so that they do not walk all over the weak ones. When there is a feeling of insecurity, there is a tendency to violate the rights of those we perceive as the enemy. Yet as we know, what we need is assurance that we are all secure. Insecurity of individuals within the national boundaries exacerbates the insecurity of that country. Similarly, a feeling of insecurity by any nation, threatens the security of the whole world. It is important that we all have a sense of security, not so much because we possess weapons, which can protect us from other nations, but because no one needs to silence others to submission so that they can feel secure. Until all of us, feel, secure, none of us can be truly secure.

At this stage in our human evolution, we must seek collective security of all people and all nations. We want to ensure the survival of our planet. Environmental degradation, poverty and over consumption continue to threaten the planet from many fronts. We all know them. The more our resources become depleted due to overuse by some, pollution and loss, the more likely it is for us to fight over whatever is left. The enemy becomes who ever sits on these resources. Conflicts and wars are not accidents. They happen because we have worked towards them rather than work to prevent them. Ensuring that we live in a clean and healthy environment is one way we can pre-empt conflict

I come from a continent that has known many conflicts for a long time. Many of them are glaringly due to bad governance, unwillingness to share resources more equitably, selfishness and failure to promote cultures of peace. Leaders fail to care enough for the ordinary citizens.

In my own continent, as I speak we continue to have problems in Darfur region in Sudan, Somalia, Ivory Coast, DRC, CHAD and many other corners of the African continent. All of the conflicts can be traced to failure in governance, responsible and accountable management of resources, to share resources more equitably and failure to cultivate cultures of peace. Indeed all over the world, the root cause of conflicts is inequities, both national and international. There is hardly any conflict in the world that is an exception. Below the thin layer of racial and ethnic chauvinism, religion and politics, the real reason for many conflicts is the struggle for the access and control of the limited resources on our planet.

I wish to take this opportunity to commend the African leaders, whose region has been plagued with conflicts and violation of human rights for many decades. They are now consciously and deliberately making efforts to promote good governance in Africa especially through the African Union. It is proving very difficult but the leaders need to continue being encouraged by the organs of the United Nations as well as by other nations.

Challenges are many and varied, but what is encouraging is the commitment demonstrated by these leaders, to shun conflict and violence through peaceful resolutions. To promote dialogue, reconcile, forgive and heal. Only then will development and reduction of poverty and misery be addressed.

As part of this drive, I have been invited by the Heads of States in the Central African sub-region to be a Goodwill Ambassador for the Congo Forest Ecosystem. This forest is not only important to Africa but to the whole world especially with respect to the global warming and climate change. The forest is the second largest: only second to the Amazon Forest. Both forests, and indeed other forests of the world are very important to the health of the planet and our own right to a clean and healthy environment. We all have a responsibility to save them. We owe it to ourselves and future generations

I have also been requested by the African Union to preside over the mobilization of the African Civil Society in order to form a regional forum, which will advise the Union on how to manage African affairs more justly and responsibly. We all know that weak civil societies cannot hold their leaders responsible and accountable to the people and that in such situations it is easier to ignore the rule of law and violate human rights. Therefore strengthening civil society would strengthen the democratisation process and respect for human rights. A strong civil society can also be an important vehicle for delivery of services like health, education and protection of the environment. The Green Belt Movement is seeking partners to advance these two issues so as to support democratization and protection of the environment.

One of the difficult issues we face in sustainable development is consumerism, especially in the rich industrialized countries. In this case technological advances can assist with the campaign to reduce, reuse and recycle resources (the 3R that I am sure many of us are aware of). Recently while visiting Japan, I learnt of the concept of *mottainai*, which not only calls for the practising of the 3R but also teaches us to be grateful, to not waste and be appreciative of the limited resources. This old Buddhist teaching is in complete agreement with the concept of sustainable management of

resources. Indeed I was very impressed to learn that using technology, many new items were being made from recycled materials like plastic waste, from which companies could make beautiful *furoshiki*.

Countries that generate much waste must assume responsibility and take action against threats like global warming and climate change. The Green Belt Movement is also seeking partners with whom it can plant trees and offset some of the carbon contributed by the partners in their daily lives.

As I continue to plant trees, and to protect those that are standing, let us remember that victims of human rights reflect our human values as a civilized society. We can still make our world a better place for all mankind. But let us remember that while the rest of the species can survive without us, we cannot survive without them. Respecting the rule of Nature is equally important. In 1972 when the world met in Stockholm it considered the fate of the human environment. Today we recognize that the fate of that environment is dependent on the non-human environment.