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High-Level Segment

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Statement by

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on behalf of the European Union**

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Mr President,

It is a great honour for me to speak to you today on behalf of the European Union and of the candidate countries.

Last June, when we met here in Geneva to establish the Human Rights Council, it was clear to us that we had merely taken the first step in a complex and ambitious undertaking.

After all, the Human Rights Council had been called on by the General Assembly of the United Nations to review and improve, within a one-year time frame, existing UN instruments and procedures for protecting and promoting human rights.

This process has not yet been completed. We all know that the outcome will be decisive in determining whether the Council, in future, will be able to adequately shoulder the responsibility which it has been given.

Mr President,

The promotion and protection of human rights is a pillar of the United Nations, just as important as ensuring security and peace and promoting sustainable development.

During the last few decades, it has been shown time and again that human rights can only be implemented and protected effectively if we adhere strictly to the following fundamental principles:

- that human rights are universal, indivisible and interdependent;
- that civil and political rights on the one hand and economic, social and cultural rights on the other hand are of equal importance;
- that the respect and protection of human rights are only possible in an environment where security is organized and guaranteed;
- that, at the same time, the values we are struggling to establish must not be sacrificed in the fight against terrorism.

Preserving this heritage and making it our own again as we look ahead to the future: that is what the Human Rights Council's technical-sounding "institution building" project is ultimately all about.

Mr President,

Please permit me, on behalf of the European Union, to formulate four priorities for negotiations over the coming weeks and months:

FIRST: The European Union is firmly in favour of putting in place a credible and effective Universal Periodic Review. This mechanism is designed to counteract regular claims that human rights work at the United Nations is selective and politicized. The aim here is universal acceptance, universal application and universal implementation of what the Review has to say.

SECOND: The system of Special Rapporteurs, which has grown and proved its worth over many years, must not be weakened in any way. In fact, the European Union will continue to push for the improvement and reinforcement of this system, which is the “eyes and ears” of the Council. We owe the Special Rapporteurs our thanks for their hard work and commitment, often in difficult circumstances, in upholding human rights.

THIRD: A Human Rights Council which is vibrant and makes a difference must also be a forum for the voices of those who defend human rights and often speak for the victims of human rights violations. Human rights could not be protected effectively were it not for the work of the defenders of these rights, both individuals and NGOs, who dedicate themselves – often at great risk – to ensuring that human rights are observed on the ground and who often speak for the victims of human rights violations. This is an important means of promoting the “culture of cooperation” enshrined in the Resolution establishing the Council. The European Union therefore strongly supports granting representatives of civil society an extensive right to attend and speak at Council debates.

FOURTH: The way in which the Council and its members act and think is often – all too often, unfortunately – determined by their affiliation with regional blocs and interest groups.

We must all be willing to stop thinking in terms of “them” and “us” if we are to shoulder our responsibility and live up to people’s expectations of the Council.

It is not acceptable that very serious human rights violations are not addressed – or are not addressed with the necessary directness – because regional or ideological solidarity takes precedence over the willingness to see critical situations without bias. There should only be one type of solidarity here, and that is absolute solidarity with the cause of human rights!

The EU will therefore be directing its particular attention to the situation in Darfur – one of the worst cases of persistent and most serious violations of human rights – and to acting on the report and recommendations of the High-Level Evaluation Mission to Darfur.

The clear support of the Council for this mission and the report it presented is also important to demonstrate that the Council is determined to defend its own instruments.

Where there are extreme violations of human rights, we owe it to the people affected and to the international community not to remain silent and look away.

Mr President,

For many years now, the world-wide abolition of the death penalty has been one of the key concerns of Europe’s human rights policy. Our drive against the death penalty is not a struggle along regional or cultural borders, but rather a global campaign against a cruel and inhuman punishment which, as has been proven, does not serve as a deterrent to criminal acts.

It is important that support for abolishing the death penalty worldwide is growing. The number of States to have completely abolished the death penalty has continued to rise. At the General Assembly in December 2006, it was possible, for the first time ever, to read a declaration by 85 States against the death penalty.

These are positive signs which show that the issue must remain on the United Nations agenda.

Mr President,

The European Union has firmly supported the Human Rights Council right from the start.

However, if the Council is to be successful, it requires cooperation and support from all States -- including those which are not currently members. After all, the protection and promotion of human rights is and remains a matter for the entire international community.

Mr President,

Before I finish, I would like to take this opportunity to express my own personal thanks and appreciation for what you have achieved as President during the first year of the Human Rights Council. Thanks to your tireless work and commitment, we have been able to make progress in institution-building at the Human Rights Council.

I would also like to thank the four Facilitators for their endeavours so far in this field. They have shown great circumspection and personal commitment.

For the last few steps of this journey, I wish you strength, confidence and a sure hand.

The European Union will do everything it can to support you during this process
