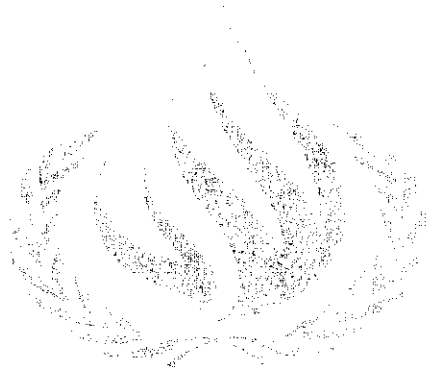


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Statement by Louise Arbour,
United Nations High Commissioner
for Human Rights



to the
Opening of the 4th Session of the
Human Rights Council

Geneva, 12 March 2007

Mr. President,
Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am delighted to have this opportunity to address you at the opening of this important session of the Human Rights Council. You have been for many months deeply engaged in fleshing out what was, at the outset of your deliberations, little more than an idea within general parameters. The Council's permanent architecture and its most important procedures should be in place shortly.

In fact, institution building has been the dominant and constant preoccupation of Council members and of the broader human rights community this year. At the same time, your special sessions have highlighted pressing human rights issues, starkly reminding us that institutional and procedural concerns must not overshadow the substantive human rights agenda.

Indeed, as we strive to construct a system to review the performance of states in the discharge of their human rights obligations, we speak of fairness and impartiality towards the government under review. This is a perfectly well- founded concern, but one that should be pursued with equal dedication

when we consider the thousands of individuals who receive neither fairness nor impartiality when they seek to address their own individual grievances to their governments.

Excellencies,

I have spoken before about poverty and discrimination as both the causes and the consequences of the most egregious violations of human rights and attacks on human dignity. I have also stressed that armed conflict, whether internal or international, inevitably increases the threats to life and the vulnerability of civilians. Yet poverty and war are often perceived as akin to natural disasters, unfortunate and deplorable things that happen, but that are essentially unavoidable and for which no one can really be held responsible.

While we continue to indulge in this convenient fatalism, it is considerably more difficult to dismiss human rights violations that are individualized and clearly man-made. Disappearances, Illegal detention, mistreatment of detainees, abuses of patients in mental institutions, discriminatory laws, exploitation of migrants, the selling of women into prostitution or domestic labour slavery, the beating of children, the brutal repression of opinions and

beliefs, and the abandonment and neglect of the elderly in state-run institutions can hardly be described as natural, unavoidable occurrences.

As we continue to pursue with unrelenting dedication the design of the perfect Human Rights Council, we should speak with conspicuous clarity about the ills that it is mandated to redress.

In the same way, as we deploy resources to train and assist government officials in meeting their treaty reporting obligations, we should not lose sight of the purpose of the exercise. The object is not, in and of itself, to document and expose efforts and shortcomings. It is to make something stop or something happen. It is, in my view, our professional collective responsibility to articulate unambiguously the true nature of the severe deprivations of rights, to provide redress and to call to account those who bear responsibility. And I suggest to you that our inability to do it as thoroughly as we should cannot serve as a pretext for not doing it at all.

Mr. President,
Excellencies,

I encourage you to maintain the momentum of engagement, and the spirit of compromise that has characterized your work so far, particularly since you are now embarking in the last and most challenging chapter of your collective effort.

In addition to the array of issues that will need to be finalized in the weeks ahead, a third of the Council's membership will be the subject of the upcoming elections. In that context, I wish to stress one distinctive feature of this institution that was meant to be a guarantor of the international community's confidence in the new Council: members are elected on the basis of their individual pledges and commitments, and are expected to participate in a competitive process for the privilege of serving on the HRC. This characteristic ensures that the work of the Council reflects genuine human rights concerns, and not merely the lowest common denominator of regional interests. In last year's election almost all regions presented more candidates than their allocated seats on the Council. This was a welcomed development, in keeping with the spirit of the founding resolution, and I call on all member states to consider their potential candidacy to the upcoming elections in that light, and to insist that others do the same.

My colleagues and I look forward to assisting the Council
in these challenging times ahead.

Thank you, Mr. President.