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**Address by Ms. Louise Arbour
United Nations High Commissioner
for Human Rights**



**On the Occasion of the 1st session of the
Human Rights Council**

Geneva, 19 June 2006

Mr. President,

Allow me to join in the good wishes extended to you by the Secretary-General and to express, in particular, my gratitude to you for the leadership that you have already demonstrated on the itinerary to this historic moment.

Monsieur le Secrétaire général, Excellences, Mesdames et Messieurs.

Je suis très honorée de me joindre à vous en cette mémorable occasion.

58 ans après la proclamation de la Déclaration universelle des droits de l'homme, nous sommes à l'orée d'une ère nouvelle. De grands espoirs reposent sur ce Conseil qui devra marquer le passage d'une période d'affirmation des idéaux et des normes des droits de

l'homme, vers une période qui consacre leur mise en œuvre de façon efficace.

La reconnaissance graduelle, mais constante, des droits de la personne humaine n'aurait pas été possible sans les femmes et les hommes qui ont consacré leurs vies et leur travail à la poursuite de ces idéaux. La création d'institutions, telles que la Commission des droits de l'homme et maintenant le Conseil, concrétise leur vision, et démontre également que les idéaux peuvent non seulement être une source d'inspiration, mais aussi un héritage durable pour tous.

Yet no institution maintains its legitimacy in perpetuity without the driving force and courage of re-invention. A reinvigorated vision for human rights is at the heart of the Secretary-General's agenda for reform, which the World Summit endorsed. In one of history's felicitous confluences, the Secretary-General's vision met with the determination of

the President of the General Assembly, and of his predecessor, to champion the reform project and ensure that it would become a blueprint for real change.

And now we have a new opportunity to map out a path that would serve not only the purposes of consolidation and norm-setting, but crucially also that of progress in these norms' universal implementation and enforcement. Victims of human rights abuses all over the world, and future generations will judge us by our willingness and ability to shed the comfort of habit, to fight inertia, reject expediency, and fulfil promises with action.

Our foundations are sound, as they are rooted in ideas that the test and grind of time could not erode. Franklin Delano Roosevelt's formidable intuition of what constitutes the scaffolding of human rights is as relevant today as it was more than sixty years ago. President Roosevelt's four freedoms—freedom from want, freedom from fear, freedom

of expression and freedom of worship—challenged us to promote liberty through democracy, justice and an equitable distribution of resources, and to create an environment tolerant of dissent and difference, enhancing opportunities for all to live a life with dignity.

We have come a long way in understanding the essential contours of that challenge and in identifying how to address all its ramifications. Today, there can be no doubt that human rights; peace and security; and economic and social development represent the three mutually reinforcing, interlinked pillars of the United Nations and the prerequisites for our collective well-being.

Our quest for the realization of all rights, human security, universal welfare, and tolerance is a perpetual pursuit which requires a sustained commitment. Despite our growing global base of financial and human capital, increasingly sophisticated technology, and the experience of

decades of international cooperation, poverty, inequality, violence and repression continue to fuel threats both within societies and across borders. We now know that combating and eliminating these threats and their consequences will be our task and that of generations to come.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen

The remoteness of the horizon should not encourage procrastination and, ultimately, an evasion of choice. On the contrary, it should stimulate us to channel leadership, resources and energies to deliver prompt, just and durable protection to whom it matters most and when and where it is needed most urgently.

At the national level, effective protection requires putting in place institutions to safeguard the rule of law and justice. Commitments to accountability, participation, good governance, and to upholding human rights, as well as the

promotion of social and economic development, and a fair distribution of resources are indispensable factors in ensuring that peace and security take a firm hold.

Yet when national protection systems fail, whether through inadequacy, incompetence, indifference, or malice, the task of this Council is to acknowledge and respond to the despair or the outrage generated by abuse, inequity, and discrimination.

Too many times the promise of protection has gone unmet. When lives and livelihoods are lost or imperiled, the emptiness of paper guarantees, not backed by the genuine resolve to act, is nothing short of betrayal.

The Human Rights Council is uniquely positioned to redress the shortcomings of the past. It is empowered to devise the means that will prevent abuses, protect the most vulnerable, and expose perpetrators. By presenting their

candidacies, as well as their pledges and commitments to promote and uphold human rights, Council members have already assumed solemn obligations in the eyes of all people.

Despite these solemn undertakings, some critics see little value in what they deem as yet another series of empty declarative gestures.

It is incumbent upon all members of the Human Rights Council to prove these critics wrong and earn the trust invested in this new body. Through its deliberations, the Council should search for, articulate and implement a broad concept of universality of rights and freedoms, designed to reflect first and foremost individual human dignity, rather than cater to the narrow pursuit of national self-interest and regional factionalism. Properly understood and applied, international human rights law speaks to all that unites us in our most fundamental aspirations and entitlements. From its very inception, the Council must strive to vindicate the

expectations and hopes of all people whose welfare so urgently depends on this new body's decisions and action.

In doing so, the Council will underscore the interdependence of all rights. It must equip itself to confront the greatest human rights challenges of our era: those posed by poverty, discrimination, and conflict. It must muster the will to uphold the rule of law in the face of global threats, such as terrorism, and promote credible, independent, and effective institutions of governance.

Equally wise would be for the new body to tap into the enormous resources of expertise and experience that human rights defenders, nongovernmental organizations and civil society as a whole can offer. Their independent scrutiny ensures that accountability is not a mirage. Responsiveness to the sentiment and needs of the communities they come from and serve is what, in the end, makes a country's social contract work. Drawing on civil society's knowledge,

vigilance and energy will help the Council target its action more effectively and justly. It will also set the example for reluctant governments to do the same.

We should always recall that no single country's human rights record is pristine. Impunity, oppression, and discrimination are sadly pervasive, to varying degrees. Democratic space and participatory governance have not ceased to be challenged. Pillage of resources by the strong continues to deprive the weak. But let's also remember that today's tyrants, abusers and predators can escape neither the judgment of history nor, increasingly, the reach of justice in their lifetime.

On all these accounts, the Council will be called to task. For the next one, two, and three years, it is people sitting in this room today that will determine its fate.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen

The Council is off to a very good start with Ambassador Luis Alfonso de Alba as its President. This new body's stewardship has been placed in impartial, competent, and trusted hands. Mr. President, members of the Human Rights Council, my colleagues and I stand ready to assist you in the momentous endeavor you are about to undertake.

I wish you all fresh inspiration and courage as you hold in trust the hopes of the many and the rights of all.

Thank you.