



Statement by

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Mr President, Excellencies, distinguished delegates,

Respect. Respect is a concept that is central to all world religions, and to humanism. But respect does not come automatically. It requires effort, commitment and a genuine interest in one another. People often fail to make this effort and that worries me. There are too many people who *demand* respect for themselves, but fail to *show* it to others.

Respect is not a one-way street. You reap what you sow. A smile in the street will easily be returned. There is much wisdom in the universal rule that you *should do to others as you would have them do to you*, as it says in the Bible. We find this "Golden Rule" not only in Matthew's Gospel¹ but also in the teachings of Confucius,² in the Bhagavad-Gita,³ in the Talmud⁴ and in the words of the Prophet Muhammad, who urged believers in his Last Sermon to *hurt no one, so that no one may hurt you*.⁵

These same values lie at the heart of my human rights policy. Shortly after taking office, I announced from this podium that I would raise the Dutch human rights profile in the years ahead, and that I would outline my policy intentions in a document. And now I have indeed presented a strategy to the Dutch parliament giving human rights a central role in Dutch foreign policy.

I did so because I believe it is vital that human rights be promoted and upheld in places where they are under threat. This year marks the sixtieth anniversary of the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. This unique document sets down the 'values of the world': justice, equality, solidarity, humanity and liberty. Human rights reflect these values; they are

¹ *So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets* Matthew 7:12

² *Tsze-kung asked, saying, "Is there one word which may serve as a rule of practice for all one's life?" The Master said, "Is not reciprocity such a word? What you do not want done to yourself, do not do to others."*, The Analects XV.23

³ *Krishna says, "That one I love who is incapable of ill will, and returns love for hatred*

⁴ *When he went before Hillel, he said to him, 'What is hateful to you, do not to your neighbour: that is the whole Torah, while the rest is the commentary thereof; go and learn it.'* Talmud, Shabbath 31a

⁵ *Khutbatul Wada*, the Last Sermon of the Prophet Muhammad, as referred to in Hadith.

what bind us together in this world, as was confirmed by 171 states in Vienna in 1993 at the World Conference on Human Rights. Human rights are not a Western invention. Tradition, culture or religion can never justify human rights violations. Human rights are the ground rules setting out how people should treat one another in a civilised society. Promoting and protecting them requires a greater effort from all of us.

In this respect, I would like to thank the Office of the High Commissioner on Human Rights for its dedication, pro-active attitude and expertise. Ms Arbour, you and your staff can count on our continued support. I believe it is essential for the High Commissioner to do her work in full independence.

Human rights apply to all people, in all places and at all times.

They apply to children in **Uzbekistan** picking cotton for long hours for little or no wages, when they should be in school. Worldwide, over 200 million children labour in harsh conditions. Over 75% of these children are victims of the worst forms of child labour, such as prostitution, slavery and trafficking. There is no excuse for their exploitation and bleak prospects. The Netherlands emphasises children's rights in its human rights policy. To the European Commission, I have proposed a ban on the sale of goods that have been produced using any form of slavery or practice similar to slavery, such as debt bondage, serfdom or forced or compulsory labour.

Human rights apply to women in the **Democratic Republic of Congo**, where rape has taken on pandemic forms. Where chaos and anarchy prevail, basic values are thrown overboard, giving what seems to be licence to sexually molest every woman or girl in sight. The atrocities these women face on a daily basis are sickening. There is no excuse for their pain and anguish. The Netherlands focuses on violence against women in its human rights policy. Women's rights are also one of the four priorities of Dutch development policy. I commend the Special Rapporteur on Violence against Women, Ms Yakin Ertürk, for her work and I trust that her mandate will be extended at this session.

Human rights also apply to lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people. In 85 countries, homosexuality is still punishable by law and people can be prosecuted because of their sexual orientation. In five countries in the world – **Afghanistan, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Sudan and**

Yemen – consensual sexual acts by people of the same sex are even capital crimes. There is no excuse for the humiliation and exclusion of homosexual people – let alone for imposing the death penalty on them. Decriminalising homosexuality and countering discrimination based on sexual orientation are priorities within Dutch human rights policy. The Dutch government subscribes to the Yogyakarta Principles on the application of international human rights law in relation to sexual orientation and gender identity. I call upon other states to embrace these principles as well.

Tradition, culture or religion must never be used to justify the violation of human rights. Equally, there can be no special circumstances in which human rights violations may be condoned. A simple example is our duty to protect people from torture. The fight against terrorism has sparked a debate on whether there are circumstances in which torture may be acceptable. I have a very simple answer to that: no. Torture is not acceptable in any circumstances. I condemn practices such as waterboarding which have been used on detainees in **Guantánamo Bay**. I condemn practices such as waterboarding which have been used on detainees in Guantánamo Bay and other reported cases of torture in Uzbekistan, Belarus, Zimbabwe, Russia, Democratic Republic of Congo, Algeria, Nepal, Sri Lanka and many others. I urge all these states to put an end to impunity for torture. The Special Rapporteur for Torture has many pending visit requests. I call on the states concerned to issue an invitation to the Special Rapporteur.

Nor can the right to freedom of religion and belief be eroded. Freedom of religion means the freedom to profess one's beliefs, but it also means a duty to respect the religious or philosophical convictions of others. It also means the right to choose and to change one's beliefs. Christians in Muslim countries should be able to freely profess their faith. And the same freedom should of course be extended to Muslims in the Netherlands. Those in my country who call for the Koran to be banned are undermining the central principle of universal human rights. I condemn calls like these in the strongest possible terms. I assure you that the Dutch government would never support proposals for such a ban, as that would be a flagrant violation of the fundamental rights which are enshrined in our Constitution and in international human rights instruments.

Freedom of religion may sometimes appear to be at odds with freedom of expression. It is clear that freedom of expression also involves responsibilities, as explicitly stated in the

International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. In my view, one of these responsibilities is to consider the consequences of one's words. In expressing our opinions we have a responsibility to respect others. We should stand firm against expressions of religious intolerance in our societies, whether they are aimed at Islam, Judaism, Christianity or any other religion or belief.

For people to live their lives in dignity, it is important to fulfil not only their civil and political rights, but also their economic, social and cultural rights. President Roosevelt rightly included 'freedom from want' among his famous four freedoms.

In that sense, I am proud to announce here today that the Netherlands will join the group of countries who have recognised the right to water as a human right. The availability of clean drinking water is decreasing worldwide: 1.8 billion people have poor access to water and consumption of polluted water will continue to be the main cause of poor health and high mortality rates for decades to come. Merely recognising the right to water as a human right will not solve this pressing issue, but I am certain that it is a powerful incentive to increase access to water for the poor. I hope the Human Rights Council will reach a clear consensus that the right to water is indeed a human right, so that we can all make visible progress on this important issue.

Ladies and gentlemen,

This year, I invited two youth representatives from the Netherlands to join me on my trip to Geneva. They are 16 and 18 years old. It is important that young people see what is going on here, and also that their voice is heard. I hope that what they see is an effective, credible Human Rights Council, that works hard for the oppressed of the world. In this respect, I would like to repeat what the High Commissioner has said this morning: it is not the perfection of the procedures we follow in the Human Rights Council that is important, but a real and visible improvement of the human rights situations in the countries concerned.

I believe that we have made substantial progress over the past year, preserving important special mechanisms for example. I trust that we can build on these achievements by extending other mandates as well. This session will, for instance, decide whether to extend the mandate of the Special Rapporteur on **Burma**. We have seen over the past years that the current

Rapporteur, Sergio Pinheiro, has done extremely useful work in a country where flagrant, systematic human rights violations are the order of the day. I will never forget the images of police officers brutally silencing monks who were peacefully demonstrating and exercising their right to freedom of expression. I count on the Council's continued support for this and other mandates that are up for renewal.

I am looking forward to the first Universal Periodic Reviews that will be carried out in April. It is quite an achievement that we managed to agree on the modalities, but as always the proof of the pudding is in the eating. The UPR is an extremely important instrument, since it does not distinguish between countries: it is truly universal! What happens in April will set the standard for the future, so we shoulder a great responsibility to turn the UPR into an effective instrument. We owe it to ourselves to make it a big success.

The Netherlands is one of the countries that is up for review in April. I have always said that we welcome review by others, and that we will take the resulting recommendations very seriously.

Ladies and gentlemen,

In an open and mature dialogue, we can and should be critical of each other. But criticism should always be voiced, and countered, with respect.

I started out by emphasising the importance of respect. Let me end on the same note. I have a vision of a world in which all are equal, where justice and solidarity prevail, where people live their lives in freedom and human dignity. Respect for human rights is the road that will lead us to such a world. Let us walk down that road together.

Thank you.