

**Statement by**

**Mr. Manuel Lobo Antunes**

**Deputy Foreign Minister of Portugal**

**High Level Segment of the  
7<sup>th</sup> session of the Human Rights Council**

**Geneva, 3 March 2008**

Check against delivery

Mr President, Excellencies, Distinguished delegates

It is an honour and a privilege for me to address this assembly. First, let me take this opportunity to congratulate you, Mr President, on your leadership over the last nine, very challenging, months, that have been of great importance to the establishment of this Council and its action.

Let me also underline that we associate ourselves with the statement made earlier by the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Slovenia on behalf of the European Union.

The promotion and protection of Human Rights are among the core duties of the international community. Two years ago, we were offered an opportunity to improve the efficiency of the UN Human rights machinery. Two years on, the Human Rights Council has consolidated its place in the United Nations system. We all have greatly contributed with our work to ensure that the Council preserves the strengths of the earlier Commission, including the Special Procedures and its practices of NGO participation, while creating innovative and reinvigorating mechanisms that make a real difference for this new body. But be under no illusion. Our work is not yet complete and we need to continue to aim high and work hard, with optimism and vision.

Let me at this point praise the work of the Special Rapporteurs, human rights experts and field officers of the Office of the High Commissioner, as well as the role of the High Commissioner herself, Mrs Louise Arbour, in preventing, on a daily basis, human rights violations. Let me also pay a special tribute to the work of anonymous Human Rights defenders, not only the staff of human rights organizations, but also lawyers, journalists,

judges, teachers, doctors, politicians who take a stand against human rights violations and are often targets of threats, attacks and harassment.

The Human Rights Council is still very young and some important parts of it are still under construction. It has nevertheless already proven useful, a true platform for the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms, everywhere: several Special Sessions have been dedicated to the urgent human rights situations in Myanmar, Darfur and the Middle East. Moreover, its regular sessions have covered not only the institutional-building aspects of this new body but also important thematic issues and human rights situations.

What more can we do to ensure that the unique and global responsibility of the Council is fulfilled? We certainly need to continue to work together, to deepen our discussion on human rights issues and to reinforce the dialogue between different regions of the world, listening more to each other's points of view while bearing in mind the universality of our common values.

One of the new initiatives of this Council, the Universal Periodic Review, is a challenge for the weeks and months to come. We shall all bear a heavy responsibility: to make this new tool a credible one. And, again, expectations are high. Of course, the Universal Periodical Review should be a balanced and transparent mechanism; of course, it should be able to establish how a member state is meeting the obligations it has accepted. Our international obligations and our voluntary pledges cannot be empty words, and no country should be exempt from scrutiny of its human rights record. To argue that there is no room for scrutiny and criticism is the best way of giving solid arguments to those who want to discredit the work of

this body. Do we want this Council to have an impact; do we want to make it work?

It is vital that the Council lives up to the expectations that the world has placed on it; it is vital that this Council speaks out against gross and systematic violations, or it will lose its credibility. Silence or inaction will not be understood: not by the victims of human rights violations around the world, and not by our own constituencies. Members and observers of the Council should continue to take part in honest discussions and engage in constructive cooperation to make this Council an efficient and effective body of the United Nations. Let me be very clear: to achieve that aim the Council has to be able to point out when international human rights standards are violated, and has to be able to offer assistance and support to the victims.

Mr. President,

Portugal is firmly committed to the promotion and protection of human rights and has engaged with this Council and its predecessor, including with national initiatives regarding economic, social and cultural rights and right to education in particular.

My country attaches crucial importance to the suffering of the victims of human rights violations. We have striven to raise the cases of those who live in fear anywhere in the world, as we did in the past with the East Timorese. Of particular concern to us is the situation in Darfur, but there are numerous other issues that merit attention. The situations in countries like Burma/Myanmar, DPRK, Zimbabwe, Belarus and Uzbekistan are among those that should be addressed by this Council. Recent incidents in Chad or Kenya are also a matter of concern; in this respect, let me

underline that it is important that the Council adapts its work in order to achieve concrete results on the ground.

Bearing in mind our firm stand against the death penalty – Portugal abolished this inhumane punishment in 1867 –, we also believe in the need to involve this Council in the fight for the universal abolition of that punishment. It is an issue of fundamental importance for the enhancement and progressive development of human rights. The resolution on a moratorium on the use of the death penalty, adopted in the General Assembly last autumn, was in this regard a major success and Portugal is proud to be associated to this victory.

In the framework of this Council, we definitely need to continue our fight for the full implementation of human rights without discrimination on the basis of gender, sexual orientation, race or religion. Civil, cultural, economic, political and social rights need to be placed on an equal footing, viewed with the same level of urgency and importance.

Mr. President,

Portugal is deeply committed to the promotion of Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. We have traditionally been the main co-sponsor of a resolution on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights at the UN and, in 2002, a Working Group was created to proceed with the drafting of an Optional Protocol to the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. This Optional Protocol will finally put an end to the disparities in the treatment given to the two sets of human rights by establishing a system of communications on any of the rights set forth in the Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. I would like in this regard to praise Mrs Catarina Albuquerque for her excellent work in the conduct of the

Working Group's discussions. This Working Group has been meeting for almost six years now, allowing for very rich discussions concerning the contents of the future Optional Protocol.

A clear majority of delegations is now in favour of a comprehensive Optional Protocol, and my country sincerely hopes that the forthcoming meeting of the Working Group will be able to achieve concrete results. Indeed, after six years of intense debates, it is now time to take political decisions in line with our human rights commitments. The fact that 2008 marks the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights should also encourage the Working Group to accomplish its mission and lay the groundwork for this Council and the General Assembly to adopt a comprehensive Optional Protocol to the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights still this year. Such an Optional Protocol will, in fact, give practical meaning to rights in the Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights which for millions of persons in the world are still a mere mirage.

Mr. President,

To conclude, I hope that this session of the Council will achieve very concrete outcomes that may contribute in a significant way to the reinforcement of the promotion of human rights. People around the world, and in particular the victims of human rights abuses, have high expectations of this Council. Our work should not disappoint them.