



Republic of Serbia

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Statement by

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Mr. President,
Mr. Secretary-General,
Respected High Commissioner Arbour,
Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am honored to address this esteemed body of the United Nations system—the system that in today's tumultuous world is still the crucible of human hope for peace and security, the focal point of international trust, and the center of our confidence in the coming of a future that aligns our universal values with our national interests.

I am privileged to represent a country—the Republic of Serbia—that believes, with firmness of spirit and strength of conviction, in the principles that have brought us here, in this jubilee year of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, to celebrate and reflect on the central place of human rights in the world today.

Human rights are essential for achieving the progressive, peaceful development of mankind. They enable us to embrace the global diversity of views that makes us stronger as a world community, on the basis of equality and mutual respect. And they endow us with the ability to promote not only the peaceful resolution of disputes, but the reconciliation of peoples throughout the world.

That is why the Republic of Serbia will make a voluntary contribution, in line with our financial capabilities, to the budget of the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights.

Excellencies,

The struggle to instill a sense of respect and obligation on all states and all individuals to promote human rights throughout the world stands at the very peak of mankind's 20th century achievements. It is our duty to ourselves as human beings to continue to nobly strive to improve our record in the 21st century. And to re-dedicate ourselves, as members of the human family, to the respect for human rights with a determined, committed steadfastness of purpose.

To do anything else would be to deny the judgment of humanity that says, the world is, on the whole, a better place today than it has ever been before, full of the possibility that comes with a secure knowledge that our destiny is inexorably tied to one another's.

As a sign of our bedrock commitment to the respect for, and advancement of, human rights throughout the world, the Republic of Serbia has declared itself a candidate for the Human Rights Council for the period of 2008 to 2011, to be decided by a vote in the General Assembly in May of this year.

I would like to take this opportunity to express that, should Serbia be elected to the Council, we would dedicate ourselves to contribute to strengthening even further the Council's effectiveness, with a particular focus on enhancing the respect for human

rights in an ever more complex and diverse global community of nations, cultures, and religious traditions.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The democratic Government of the Republic of Serbia is proud of its record as a central pillar of human rights protection in Southeast Europe. Since the peaceful overthrow of the regime of Slobodan Milosevic in October 2000, we have made tremendous achievements on the human rights front.

This year alone, the Republic of Serbia will report to the Committee on the Rights of the Child and the Committee Against Torture, and, in December, will present a comprehensive report to the Human Rights Council, consistent with the new procedures of the Universal Periodic Review.

Moreover, during this Session of the Human Rights Council, the Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General for Human Rights Defenders will present what we confidently believe will be a positive report on her September 2007 visit to my country.

The stellar state of human rights in Serbia does not mean that there are no more challenges. But it indicates a unified national conviction to face every obstacle head on, to engage the issues forthrightly, to solve problems constructively, and to achieve results concretely.

This is not mere lip-service. We speak clearly, but we also act clearly. Our deeds match our words.

Before proceeding to the next portion of my remarks, I wish to highlight the human rights record of the northern Serbian province of Vojvodina that has been aptly termed "Europe in miniature." It is a place of toleration and integration that took in more than a quarter of a million refugees from the civil wars in Croatia and Bosnia during the 1990s.

And it is a safe bastion of prosperity in which more than 25 ethnic communities live harmoniously *together*, not just side by side: Serbs, Hungarians, Slovaks, Croats, Romanians, Roma, Slovenians, Albanians and more than a dozen other ethnic groups populate this region, lending weight to the truth that identity is not the simple result of a unification of likeness; it requires the offering and accepting of the gift of difference.

That is why I am proud of Serbia's dedication to press forward our promotion of cultural diversity, the handmaiden of human rights protection. We believe diversity to be a source of strength, and we embrace the view that individual cultures genuinely prosper and progress when they come into contact with others.

But all is not well on the human rights front in the Republic of Serbia.

Standing in stark contrast to the record of those areas covered under the direct jurisdiction of our Government institutions, the state of human rights in our southern province of Kosovo and Metohija, currently under United Nations administration, is dismal.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Kosovo is a place where the vulnerable have simply been forgotten.

In the wake of the arrival of the UN and NATO in June 1999 after a 78-day bombing campaign, hundreds of thousands of Kosovo Serbs, Roma, Bosniaks and others were ethnically cleansed from their centuries-old hearths. Hundreds have been killed, and thousands more have disappeared without a trace. Tens of thousands of homes and businesses have been destroyed, and tens of thousands more have been illegally occupied by ethnic Albanians.

The UN Committee on Human Rights has harshly criticized the lack of human rights protection in Kosovo, concluding that "discrimination against Serbs and Roma is widespread in Kosovo." Amnesty International has echoed those words. And in a report issued just a few days ago, Human Rights Watch said that "today, Kosovo is a place where human rights are frequently violated, where political violence, impunity for common and political crimes, intimidation and discrimination are commonplace. [...] Organized crime and corruption are largely unchecked, [...] witness harassment is widespread, [...] domestic violence is a serious and prevalent problem, [...] and trafficking of women remains a serious issue", as is forced prostitution.

Perhaps most appallingly, less than eight percent of the estimated 250,000 Kosovo Serb IDPs have returned to their homes, conceivably because the UNHCR warns that Kosovo Serbs, Roma and others risk persecution if they return to areas in which they would be in a minority.

It's also because for many displaced Serbs, security fears and deep concerns about freedom of movement, access to courts, employment, housing, healthcare, education and other public services impede return.

The litany of offences is endless; the remedial list of concrete steps taken is trivial.

Consider that hundreds of Serbian holy sites remain to this day under the heavy protection of NATO. Monks, nuns and priests live encircled by tanks, barbed wire, and electric fences.

More than 150 Serbian Orthodox monasteries and churches have been destroyed since June 1999 in wanton acts of cultural cleansing, including 35 in a three-day period in March 2004.

Let me pause for a moment on the significance of these living religious communities, and of Kosovo more generally, for the Serbian people. The Orthodox holy sites of Kosovo—some of which have been placed on UNESCO's List of World Heritage Sites, and alarmingly, on its List of World Heritage in Danger—stand at the

foundation of Serbian identity. They are not simply buildings or mere monuments. They constitute an essential link to the living tradition of Serbia today.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The unilateral, illegal, and illegitimate declaration of independence of Kosovo's Assembly on February 17th from the Republic of Serbia has profoundly affected my country. For Kosovo is the essential link between our proud national past and our proud European future.

But that is not the only cause of the present apprehension throughout the region and around the world, caused by the illegal acts of the authorities in Pristina. As a result of the recognition by about twenty countries of the attempted secession of the Kosovo Albanians from Serbia, the innate operating logic of the international system has come under direct attack.

And I will tell you why. The United Nations Charter and Security Council Resolution 1244 (1999) places a *binding* obligation on all member-states to respect the sovereignty and territorial integrity of all internationally recognized states, including the Republic of Serbia.

By furthering the secessionist cause of the Kosovo Albanians, the international system has become more unstable, more insecure, and more unpredictable. A terrible precedent has been established.

Recognizing the unilateral declaration of Kosovo's independence from Serbia legitimizes the doctrine of imposing solutions to ethnic conflicts. It legitimizes the act of unilateral secession by a provincial or other non-state actor. It transforms the right to self-determination into an avowed right to independence. It legitimizes the forced partition of internationally-recognized, sovereign states. And it supplies any ethnic or religious group with a grievance against its capital with a play book on how to achieve their ends.

I want to be very clear. We will never recognize the attempt by the authorities in Pristina to unilaterally secede from Serbia. We call upon the countries that have recognized to reconsider, and we call on those that have not to stay the course, to help us defend the international system from being fundamentally undermined. And we applaud the United Nations in so far as resisting the pressure from a vocal minority of countries to cede the administration of Serbia's southern province to an illegitimate European Union mission, in clear violation of Security Council Resolution 1244. We hope that this will continue. Anything less would strike at the very heart of the core constituent elements of global governance.

Excellencies,

We are here to talk about human rights.

So I would like to conclude my remarks to you this afternoon by telling you about a very special young woman from Kosovo.

Her name is Slobodanka Tasic. Born in 1992, she was 7 years old when the bombs began to fall on Serbia, in 1999. It was the year her father Saša went missing. It was the year her ancestral home in the village of Strezovce was torched to the ground. And it was the year she and her mother became IDPs.

It was a terrible year.

Taking shelter in a neighboring village, Slobodanka and her family remained in Kosovo and Metohija.

They survived.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Slobodanka came to world attention late last year when she wrote a letter to President Boris Tadic of Serbia, a letter he read to the Security Council.

“As I write this letter to you, I feel like a leaf on a tree that does not know which way the wind will blow”, the now fifteen year old wrote.

“My childhood is different from that of children who live in freedom. They have friends, but mine is fear. Fear of the early dawn; fear of the setting sun”, she continued.

“And it is because of all the tears of children, because of all our pain, because of the early opened wounds that do not heal, Mr. President, that I implore you to transmit my message to the world. They have taken away our right to an innocent childhood; our right to live freely; our right to be happy. They have taken away the warmth of family life. Let them not take away our right to live even such a life as we have now: the right to live in our own country.”

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Now they have tried to take even that away from her. For today Slobodanka no longer lives permanently in Kosovo.

For when her letter was read by President Tadic, her family was forced to flee by Kosovo Albanians.

They told her mother, “remember what happened to your husband.”

It was all too much for the family of a young Serbian woman from Kosovo, for the Anne Frank of the Balkans, to take. Nevertheless, she is still drawn to her birthplace, moving back and forth from the safety of Serbia proper to the danger of a Kosovo ruled by secessionists.

This is the reality of Kosovo today. A dark, ugly reality that sits in the heart of Europe.

Such is the reality that some have chosen to reward with recognition.

But I tell you in the name of the Republic of Serbia that we will never recognize an independent Kosovo. And we will employ all diplomatic and political means at our disposal to hinder, obstruct and ultimately reverse the unilateral, illegal and illegitimate declaration of independence of our southern province.

This is no temporary policy. We are not just posturing. It is a part of a national strategy to keep Serbia whole and free, fully integrated into Europe, and actively engaged with the world.

And we will pursue it for as long as our country itself survives.

Kosovo shall remain a part of Serbia forever.

Thank you, Mr. President.