

Human Rights: a Fundamental Pillar of the Global Action of the United Nations Office in Geneva

*Statement by the Director-General
Mr. Vladimir Petrovsky
to the 49th Session of the
Commission on Human Rights*

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1. It is a pleasure for me to have an opportunity, early in my tenure as Director-General of the Geneva Office, to address the Commission on Human Rights. In doing so, I wish to pay tribute to your untiring efforts in one of the most important aspects of the work of the Organization. For many years I have been involved in activities aimed at the promotion of human rights and I recall with deep satisfaction my service as Executive ^{Secretary} Director of the Conference on the Humanitarian Dimension of the CSCE organized in Moscow in 1991. This Conference set a very high standard for the observation on human rights in Europe -- a process which began in 1975, bringing European nations, some with very diverse traditions and governments, into a common effort to secure peace and improve human rights.

2. Today's United Nations is facing totally unprecedented challenges in the new international environment. With the end of the Cold War the Organization has shifted its focus from passively registering ideological differences to actively addressing pressing issues. Those challenges confront us all, directly or indirectly, from Cambodia to Former Yugoslavia; from

Afghanistan to Somalia; from Cyprus to Central America.

3. The main tasks of the Organization in those instances are no longer limited to preventive or peace-keeping measures but also include peace-building. Practical actions of the United Nations in crises situations revitalised the ideas of those who adopted the UN Charter in 1945.

4. In order to succeed in meeting the new challenges of the United Nations as we approach the year 2000, we would need to strengthen the ability of the family of the United Nations to work together under one roof; to develop meaningful relations between UN offices and regional institutions and organizations; to enhance the flow of communications; and to harvest to the fullest the fruits of its varied and sophisticated experiences.

5. In one word, we need to develop a new partnership, globally and regionally, centred around issues and based on informal but effective mechanisms of consultation and dialogue which would allow for real cooperative endeavours.

6. Of course, economic and social development which is indivisible from peace-building remains a priority of the World Organization together with the strengthening of democratic institutions and the promotion and protection of human rights. For me, human rights represent the solid base upon which rests the whole construction of a world of peace and justice in larger freedom.

7. For me, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights has the same importance as the Charter of the United Nations. More specifically, I

believe that respect for the Charter, internationally, must be matched by respect for the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, nationally.

8. Indeed, with the end of the cold war we have an entirely new situation for the action of the United Nations in the field of human rights in which every single member of the international community can play a unique and much more significant role. Today, no longer can the ideological differences of the past be used as a pretext to stop or delay the efforts of the international community for the largest possible realization of human rights standards. The major lesson which one cannot but learn from the Cold War years is that lack of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms results in the demise of those Governments which consistently deny the inherent rights of individuals.

9. Democratization of the international process, which was witnessed also by the recent enlargement of the membership of this Commission, means on the one hand that no one should impose forcefully one's own will on another member of the international community. On the other hand, it means also that no one country has a right to violate human rights with impunity, and that to remain silent, in the face of flagrant violations, would be to become accomplice of tyranny -- something no one is willing to tolerate any more.

10. In the present international conditions, marked by cooperation rather than confrontation, a new ^{spirit} world of tolerance, understanding and international solidarity is likely to emerge. In this new environment, it is not sufficient to condemn violations of human rights. There is an urgent need to do more; to go beyond that. It is indeed essential for the international community to assist the majority of countries with the

technical knowhow and the means that would make violation of human rights impossible.

11. Like in the field of international peace and security, preventive diplomacy plays an increasingly important role, so too in human rights, prevention, i.e. monitoring, technical cooperation and assistance are the keys to the effective broadening of the respect and enjoyment of human rights by everyone. In this connection, I am pleased to note that the Commission was able to increase the number and the extent of the tasks given to special rapporteurs. Monitoring is indeed an essential component of any machinery of implementation. I think it is also particularly important that the Commission has emphasized the role of human rights monitors in problem areas or in areas of conflict and hopefully even more attention will be given in the future to the development of new mechanisms of a preventive nature, including early-warning, that will allow the Organization to act before violations of human rights are committed.

12. Looking at the future, the World Conference on Human Rights, to be held in Vienna in June, is expected to deal at the highest level with the crucial questions facing the UN in connection with the promotion and protection of human rights.

13. The Secretary-General, Mr. Boutros Boutros-Ghali, has recently addressed an invitation to Governments to attend the Conference. In it, the Secretary-General stressed that the Conference will afford the international community an opportunity - the first of its kind in 25 years - to take stock of the progress that has been made, to identify obstacles to further progress and to devise ways and means of overcoming these obstacles. I

personally hope that the international community will seize this opportunity to bridge the gap between the lofty universal principles and the real individuals and groups that are with us or around us in our daily lives, thus making human rights a reality for people everywhere. The Conference will truly succeed if it results in concrete action.

14. Human Rights is a top priority of the international community and of the UN and remains a pillar of the global action of the UN Office at Geneva. As Director-General of UNOG, I will continue to stress the importance of human rights in my diplomatic activities and continue to pay special attention to the growing needs and complexity of the tasks of the Centre for Human Rights to overcome the persisting disparity between mandated tasks and resources available to it.

15. In this connection, I will give instructions to the Administration of UNOG to review the administrative and financial support provided to the Centre with a view to increasing it, in line with the recommendation of the MAS Report. I will also establish a task force to review the level of support that the Centre requires from Conference Services (including interpretation, publishing and language services) with a view to increasing it in keeping with the growing demands in the field of human rights.

16. Additionally, I will review the level of support that the Centre receives from the Information and NGOs Services available at UNOG so as to maximize existing resources and enhance the effectiveness of these services for the benefit of Governments, NGOs, the media and the wider human rights community.

17. I will follow very closely developments in this field and I am impressed by the results that this session of the Commission on Human Rights has been able to achieve, often by consensus, on such issues as Former Yugoslavia, the question of the International War Tribunal, Cambodia, racism and xenophobia, minorities, indigenous populations, etc. It is most heartening that the Commission has been able to reach new ground in a number of cases and in connection with minorities it has stressed the importance of cooperation with regional mechanisms, such as the High Commissioner for National Minorities of the CSCE. In this connection, I wish to thank Assistant Secretary General, Mr. Ibrahima Fall, and the staff of the Centre for their contribution to the success of the session, and the distinguished Chairman of the Commission and Statesman, Ambassador Mohamed Ennaceur, the Bureau, the Delegates, the representatives of the NGOs, and of course the staff of the Division of Conference Services.

18. In order to increase the effectiveness of the work of the Commission I would like to share with you some preliminary ideas for your further consideration. For instance, the Commission may wish to give even more attention in the future to early warning and preventive action. It is better to prevent an illness than to cure it. Furthermore, the Commission may wish to consider the apparent contradiction between the number of requests for assistance by governments to develop democratic institutions and the lack of funds to that end. On the one hand, we urge governments to improve the situation of human rights and, on the other hand, we are not able to practically help them. The Commission may also try to develop new forms of cooperation not only with international, but also with national NGOs. It is a fact that, in some countries, people have never heard about

the Commission and the various control mechanisms.

19. On my part, I can assure you that I will keep the focus of my attention on human rights matters and one senior staff in my own Cabinet will monitor political implications of human rights. I will also have regular meetings with the Heads of UNHCR, the Centre for Human Rights and the Geneva Office of the Department of Humanitarian Affairs to review, broadly, political and substantive questions that are relevant to this humanitarian pole of the action of the United Nations Office at Geneva.

20. These steps are aimed at reinforcing the commitment of this European Headquarters of the UN to the global action of the Organization in one of the most vital aspects of its work: the fundamental rights and freedoms of every single child, woman and man on earth.

THANK YOU