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8 December 2006

The following is the message of United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights Louise Arbour on the occasion of Human Rights Day, 10 December 2006:

The awareness of the stranglehold of poverty on billions of men, women and children around the world, and of how this state of deprivation and misery compromises our common future, has never been higher. Yet, despite an increasingly sophisticated understanding of the complex makeup of poverty, ranging from exclusion and discrimination to a skewed international trade system, approaches to poverty reduction are still often tinged with appeals to charity or altruism.

On this Human Rights Day, we reaffirm that freedom from want is a right, not merely a matter of compassion. Fighting poverty is a duty that binds those who govern as surely as their obligation to ensure that all people are able to speak freely, choose their leaders and worship as their conscience guides them.

All countries, independent of national wealth, can take immediate measures to fight poverty based on human rights. Ending discrimination, for example, will in many cases remove barriers to decent work and give women and minorities access to essential services. Better distribution of collective resources and good governance, exemplified by tackling corruption and ensuring the rule of law, are within the reach of every state.

But as much as States bear the primary responsibility for their own development, the international community must also meet the commitments it has made to support the efforts of developing countries. Many rich countries have yet to meet development assistance targets they have accepted, yet they continue to spend ten times more on military budgets. They also spend nearly four times their development assistance budget – an amount almost equal to the total gross national product of African countries – to subsidize their own domestic agricultural producers. Indifference and a narrow calculus of national interests by wealthy countries hamper human rights and development just as damagingly as discrimination at the local level.

At the 2005 World Summit, global leaders recognized that development, peace and security and human rights are mutually reinforcing. In a world where one in every seven people continues to live in chronic hunger, and where inequalities between and within countries are growing, our ability to reach the goals the Summit reaffirmed in order to 'make poverty history' will remain in serious doubt if we do not tackle poverty as a matter of justice and human rights.