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**Address by
Ms. Louise Arbour
UN High Commissioner for Human Rights**

**on the occasion of the
4th Session of the Human Rights Council**



Geneva, 15 March 2007

Mr. President,
Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen

I am grateful for this additional opportunity to address the Human Rights Council and introduce numerous country-specific and thematic reports now before you.

I have often pointed out that no country is immune from human rights problems. Thus, all countries can benefit from cooperation with human rights mechanisms and with my Office. These forms of cooperation and interaction typically vary in depth and scope. But I am persuaded that more openness and receptivity on the part of Governments bring additional benefits and resources in facing up to human rights challenges.

Many of these challenges are detailed in the reports submitted today, which also illustrate our interaction with Governments and other relevant actors. I will not attempt to discuss all these reports today. Rather, I will highlight particular situations and issues that complement my previous presentations and further exemplify significant aspects of our work.

First, allow me to draw your attention to our reports on Afghanistan, Cambodia, and Colombia and briefly expand on the problems, as well as the opportunities, that each of these countries present.

The Afghanistan Compact and the Afghanistan National Development Strategy provide a positive framework for development and improvement of the human rights situation in Afghanistan. Serious efforts are being made towards reform in key sectors, including security and justice. However, Afghanistan's transition is overshadowed by the armed conflict which intensified in 2006, further putting civilians at risk. Increased violence impedes much needed development aid from reaching the population. This compounds the condition of grinding poverty that affects the vast majority of Afghans. Improvements achieved by women are overshadowed by ongoing discriminatory practices. Arbitrary detention and torture are reported regularly. Amendments proposed to the new media law could lead to restrictions on freedom of expression. An "amnesty law" that was passed by the Afghan Parliament on Saturday would regrettably put the burden of triggering prosecutions for past crimes, including crimes against humanity and war crimes, on victims, rather than on the State.

My Office remains committed to supporting the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission. This institution continues to do excellent work, despite risks due to the security situation, which impedes access to victims and exposes the Commission to becoming a target itself. All efforts must be made to sustain the work of the Commission in order to ensure that human rights are an integral part of nation building efforts.

Similarly, in Cambodia my Office continued to monitor the overall human rights situation and responded to reports of violations of human rights, giving priority to persisting patterns of impunity and to issues faced by nongovernmental organizations, as

well as other groups and individuals defending human rights. In the area of legal and judicial reform, the Office continued to advocate for structural reform of key institutions to guarantee an independent and professional judiciary, and contributed to the development of legislation consistent with the international human rights treaties to which Cambodia is a party. I am currently discussing a standardized agreement with the Government and very much hope to have it signed in the very near future.

Turning to Colombia, let me point out that the country still faces critical human rights challenges in several regions. The persistence of the armed conflict and consequent violence, and the impact of drug trafficking and organized crime continue to affect the enjoyment of all human rights. Human rights defenders, including trade unionists and social leaders, indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities, displaced persons, women, children and journalists, are among the most affected. Illegal armed groups are responsible for serious and systematic breaches of international humanitarian law, while guerrillas persist in taking hostages, and continue to hold captive a significant number of persons.

I welcome the announcement by the President of Colombia of his agreement to the continuation of OHCHR's presence in that country. I also welcome the significant steps taken by the judiciary to investigate crimes committed by paramilitary groups, as well as these groups' alleged links with public servants. Efforts to achieve reparation for victims of human rights violations are also very encouraging. It is crucial to put an end to extrajudicial executions, enforced disappearances, and to ensure that demobilized paramilitary groups do not rearm. I call on the authorities in the strongest terms to protect human rights defenders and victims who have been targeted and threatened for demanding justice.

Excellencies,

Let me now briefly outline thematic issues that represent priorities for my Office and that engage the international community as a whole. A constant theme of our work is combating discrimination in all its forms. In this regard, I wish to draw your attention to a cluster of reports before you, in particular the progress report on the implementation of the 4th session of the Durban Working Group, the report on indigenous issues, as well as that pertaining to the promotion of cultural rights and cultural diversity.

Likewise, the fight against impunity is of paramount importance. The report submitted today reaffirms the need for a comprehensive approach towards combating impunity, including making perpetrators accountable, ensuring effective remedies and reparations to victims, and upholding the inalienable right to know the truth about violations. This document underlines how such approach requires the broad participation of civil society, particularly the victims, in designing pertinent programs. I note that domestic efforts to combat impunity have been enhanced by States' adherence to human rights treaties and their acceptance of optional complaint procedures.

The fight against impunity is also tackled in the Secretary-General's report on the question of the realization of economic, social and cultural rights. His report underscores how these rights have been comparatively neglected in strategies aimed at restoring peace and ensuring accountability in conflict and post-conflict settings.

My Office is committed to ensuring that economic, social and cultural rights are fully recognized and upheld. In the same vein, and as you could evince from my report on the right to development, it is important to continue efforts to preserve political consensus on the right to development and ensure that debate keeps moving forward on the more operational footing that can make the concept a reality. This approach is consistent with my focus on the practical implementation of all human rights.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I would like to conclude by addressing the issue of the composition of OHCHR staff, which is also the theme of one of our reports. Between 2004 and 2005, the number of posts occupied by persons from regions that were already well represented in OHCHR had increased. However, measures that we have put in place to diversify the composition of the Office have corrected that trend. Since we implemented such remedial procedures in September 2006, 31 (i.e. 69 percent) of the 45 staff selected have come from underrepresented regions. These figures are not yet optimal, but provide an indication that we are now on the right track.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The reports before you will offer both more detailed accounts of the issues I have touched upon today, as well as items that will undoubtedly engage the Council's work.

I wish you a fruitful continuation of your discussion.

Thank you.