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United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, Mary Robinson, at the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO).

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It gives me great pleasure to accept your invitation to speak here tonight. It is a praiseworthy initiative of UNESCO to have brought together a number of speakers to reflect on themes relating to the future as we approach a new millennium.

Real progress has been made on the codification of international human rights law. The progress is all the more remarkable when it is remembered that the concept of internationally agreed principles of human rights is a relatively recent phenomenon. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights is only fifty years old while the two International Covenants that derive from it, on Civil and Political Rights and on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, entered into force a little over twenty years ago. More than sixty human rights treaties have been concluded which elaborate the fundamental rights and freedoms contained in the International Bill of Rights. Issues such as racial discrimination, discrimination against women, torture and the rights of the child are covered by these treaties. And there are many Declarations on important issues such as the rights of indigenous peoples; ethnic, religious and linguistic minorities and violence against women.

Yet, in looking around at the world, it is impossible to escape the conclusion that the record in translating human rights standards and norms into national legislation and practices is a lot less impressive than the progress that has been made in putting the principles onto the international statute book. The gap between the theory of human rights and the practice is unforgivably wide. Two hundred and fifty years ago, Jean Jacques Rousseau pointed out the contrast between the idealistic view of the world and the reality he witnessed at firsthand. Things do not seem to have changed much.

Kosovo, in particular, comes to mind. Kosovo, like Bosnia, Rwanda, Somalia and Cambodia before it, raises fundamental questions about the international community's attitude to human rights abuses and its willingness to devote the necessary effort and resources to addressing gross human rights violations. Kosovo is a vivid, terrible example, here in the heart of Europe, of the gap between the rhetoric and the reality of human rights, a tragic reminder that we have no reason to feel complacent about our record in establishing a culture of human rights or the prospects for developing that culture further in the new millennium.

I saw the human suffering for myself when I visited the Former Yugoslavia and its neighbouring States last month. The sights I witnessed and the stories I heard filled me with sorrow, but also with anger: anger that such events should happen at the end of a century that has been one of the bloodiest in the history of mankind.

Kosovo, as you all know, is far from being unique. Indeed, one of the tragic aspects of the conflict there is that attention has been drawn away, as have vital resources, from the many other conflict and post-conflict situations elsewhere in the world which require urgent action. The situation in East Timor has reached a critical and worrying stage. The problems of Afghanistan remain unresolved. In Africa, a war is raging between Ethiopia and Eritrea which has cost thousands of lives. Sierra

Leone is experiencing a fragile truce and fighting continues, virtually unnoticed by the outside world, in Sudan and Angola. And these are merely some of the most serious examples.

The challenge we face is to give practical effect to the thousands of words, the thousands of promises which Governments have made, the solemn undertakings they have sworn to abide by. The aim of making human rights work and live has been constantly in my mind since I became High Commissioner for Human Rights. The office I hold is of recent vintage - it is the newest of its kind in the United Nations family. Its establishment following the World Conference on Human Rights in Vienna was evidence of a new understanding of the central role which human rights plays in the United Nations family and in international affairs. I am determined to play my part in delivering on the trust which has been placed in me. I have received strong support in my work from the Secretary General, Kofi Annan, who has directed that human rights be addressed in all United Nations programmes, as part of his reform of the organisation.

I see two principal ways of embedding a culture of human rights in the world: prevention and monitoring.

Secretary General Kofi Annan has called for the next century to be the age of prevention. Prevention is a vital part of the work of my Office and is the chief rationale behind our rapidly growing range of technical cooperation programmes with individual countries. Particular attention is being paid to establishing and supporting national human rights capacities and structures. Effective National Human Rights Institutions can be invaluable in instilling a culture of respect for human rights in a society. Another powerful preventive force is regional and sub-regional cooperation. This enables Governments to build on the experience of countries in their region, to cooperate with neighbours and to use available resources in the most efficient way. Cooperation in Europe is close, and of longstanding, but there are exciting developments in other regions too. For example, I was heartened by the enthusiasm I saw for the regional approach when I visited Mauritius recently for the first Ministerial Conference on Human Rights in Africa. The Asia-Pacific Regional Forum is proving to be a valuable instrument for change, and I have just come from Cairo where I found a strong interest in developing a regional approach in the Arab world.

There must then be proper monitoring of the performance of Governments to ensure compliance with the Covenants and International Conventions. There has been a marked change in recent years in that Governments cannot any longer seriously argue that human rights are purely an internal affair which should be exempt from external scrutiny. Governments which persist in adhering to this position must be made to see that their position is untenable. Unfortunately, even Governments which have signed up to human rights treaties continue to violate their citizens' rights, often under the pretext of protecting national security. Performance must continue to be closely scrutinised by the mechanisms such as the Human Rights Committee and the Committee on Social, Economic and Cultural Rights, and through the use of Special Rapporteurs, Working Groups and other mechanisms of the Commission on Human Rights. My overall approach to Governments will be one of dialogue and encouragement but I will not hesitate to speak out loudly and publicly when Governments persist in abusing the rights of their citizens.