AS GUIDE TO FUTURE, HISTORY MUST BE SEEN THROUGH 'MORAL PRISM',

SAYS SECRETARY-GENERAL TO BENEFIT DINNER IN NEW YORK

Following is the text of the statement by Secretary-General Kofi Annan to the fourth annual benefit dinner, hosted by Lehman Brothers, for the Facing History and Ourselves programme, delivered in New York on 14 October.

Thank you, Professor Appiah, for that kind introduction. It is not every day that I have the pleasure of being introduced by such a distinguished fellow Ghanaian at an event in New York. I am delighted, of course, to be here tonight. When Mr. Roosevelt invited me to be the keynote speaker before this discerning gathering, I realized it was not an opportunity to take lightly. I value deeply the chance to make an appeal to so many present and future leaders of American civil society.

Let me say first how much I applaud the Facing History and Ourselves programme. History is our guide to the future, for there can be no vision without a sense of history. But, history must be seen not through a crystal ball, but through a moral prism. This evening I would like to focus on a side of that prism which concerns your programme in particular; the area of human rights, and the role which individual men and women, as well as civil society, can play in advancing them.

The United Nations was born out of resistance to fascism and Nazism; out of the lesson that such evils can be combated only through united action by nations. The horror of the Holocaust drove home to the drafters of the Charter the paramount importance of human rights in a new framework of peace and security. The United Nations Charter gave universal value to the concept of human rights for the first time. In the Charter, the international community of nations recognized that all members of the human family have equal rights. It pledged that the States signing the Charter would promote "universal respect for, and observance of, human rights and fundamental freedoms for all without distinction as to race, sex, language or religion".

And so, in 1948, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was adopted. For nearly two years, under the leadership of Eleanor Roosevelt, the Commission on Human Rights had worked on the draft. In more than 80 meetings at the Palais de Chaillot in Paris, the General Assembly had revised, reviewed and voted on changes to the text. The Declaration of Human Rights is not a legally binding document. Yet, it has been a fundamental source of

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inspiration for national and international efforts to protect and promote human rights and freedoms. The main principles of the Declaration have inspired the constitutions of many countries that have become independent since it was written.

Conceived as a "common standard of achievement for all peoples and all nations", the Declaration has become a yardstick by which to measure the respect for, and compliance with, international human rights standards. The first article of the Declaration is quite simple. Let me quote it to you. "All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood."

To many of us, that first article is no less true, no less relevant and no less important today than on the day it was written. Yet today, there are also those for whom what are called universal truths are not, in fact, universal. There are those who argue that each society must choose the system that works for it at a given time. Recognizing that human rights are universal, they argue, would be both an intrusion on their sovereignty and a recipe for social and political chaos.

It is true that no single model of human rights, Western or other, represents a blueprint for all States in the transitional world. Human rights are not to be found in dusty legal libraries, but in the hearts and minds of human beings. But let there be no doubt -- there are some very basic standards of human behaviour, violations of which are simply unacceptable. Fundamental human rights are a product of human nature -- indeed human life -- itself.

I see the role of the United Nations -- and my own as Secretary-General -- as central in expressing, promoting and safeguarding those rights. In the months leading up to my election, much was heard about fiscal discipline and administrative efficiency. Yet, as I said upon taking up the job, what is and must remain our guiding star is the moral dimension of our work.

Take my own continent, Africa, as a case in point. When I went to Harare, Zimbabwe to address the Organization of African Unity (OAU) four months ago, I had a difficult message to take to them, but at the same time a very simple one. I would like to share some of it with you now. In the past five decades, Africa has been through a series of transformations. First, there was decolonization and the struggle against apartheid. Then, there was a period marked and marred by civil war and military rule. Now, I believe, it is time for Africa's third wave, a wave of peace rooted in democracy and human rights.
The success of the third wave begins with a simple proposition -- the will of the people. Many of you may not have heard that only last Wednesday, the United Nations Security Council took an unprecedented step by demanding that the military junta in Sierra Leone relinquish power. The resolution supports the subregional leaders of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), and the strongly expressed determination of the OAU, by providing for sanctions until the country's democratically elected government is restored. This is yet another indication that Africa will no longer tolerate military coups by self-appointed juntas against democratically-elected governments.

Some may argue that military regimes bring stability and predictability, or that they bring economic progress. I disagree. In South America, for example, the armies are back in their barracks, and the economies are flourishing. All across the world, the evils of coups are becoming increasingly recognized -- including by the coup-makers, once they become the victims of the next coup.

Some Africans view the concern of human rights as a rich man’s luxury, for which Africa is not ready, or even as a conspiracy, imposed by the industrialized West. I find these thoughts demeaning -- demeaning of the yearning for human dignity that resides in every African heart. Do not African mothers weep when their sons and daughters are killed or tortured by agents of oppressive rule? Do not African fathers suffer when their children are unjustly sent to jail? Is not Africa as a whole the poorer when just one of its voices is silenced?

Human rights are African rights. They are also Asian rights; they are European rights; they are American rights. They belong to no government, they are limited to no continent, for they are fundamental to humankind itself.

I know that Facing History looks at role models for moral behaviour in the face of evil and injustice and that among those role models you count Raoul Wallenberg. Earlier this year I attended the unveiling in London of a monument to Wallenberg. The occasion was deeply moving for me, both as Secretary-General of the United Nations and in my personal capacity, for Raoul is my wife’s uncle. Raoul’s life and achievements highlighted the vital role of the bystander, of the third party amidst conflict and suffering. His intervention gave hope to victims, encouraged them to fight and resist, to hang on and bear witness. It aroused our collective consciousness. The mystery remains, however: why were there so few Raouls?

Remembering his life should be an inspiration for others to act, for future generations to act, for all of us to act. As Edmund Burke said: "All that is necessary for the triumph of evil is that good men do nothing." In the coming year there will be many opportunities for good men -- and women --

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to "do something". To mark the fiftieth anniversary of the Declaration of Human Rights in December next year, the whole of 1998 has been declared human rights year. The Office of the High Commissioner of Human Rights, under the outstanding leadership of Mary Robinson, the former President of Ireland, is drawing on all parts of civil society to focus the world's attention.

Now, as the post-cold-war era takes shape, the United Nations is moving into new areas, areas that no government can tackle alone. These include the environment, sustainable development, crime, terrorism, the effects of globalization. And we are doing so with new partners -- citizens like you, organizations like Facing History, who join forces with us to achieve common goals and strengthen immeasurably the work of governments and the United Nations itself. Such new partnerships with civil society will continue to grow.

No activity of civil society is more important than education, for education is the future, and that is why programmes such as yours are faced with an ongoing challenge: the challenge of constant renewal. Like you, the United Nations has made it a particular concern to help promote education. My many years of service with the world Organization have convinced me that the first ingredient of political stability is an informed citizen, that the first ingredient of economic progress is a skilled worker, and that the first ingredient of social justice is an enlightened society.

But if the United Nations is responsible for contributing to the promotion of education, I would submit that educators, too, have certain responsibilities towards the United Nations. This is especially important at a time when some citizens -- especially in this country -- have lost faith in the Organization. Some of that past loss of faith may be understandable. But, we have, as you know, recognized the need to reform the United Nations. We are in the middle of launching the most sweeping reform programme in our Organization's history right now.

However, I would also venture that some of the disenchantment is due in part to myth, misinformation and plain ignorance. For the United Nations to earn and sustain the faith of Member States and society alike, it also needs their support. That can come in many forms -- political, military, moral, financial. But the surest support finds its roots in knowledge about the United Nations and its work. Friends, as eminent members of civil society, you can make a valuable contribution through your emphasis on education and tolerance. The challenges seem endless, but so are the opportunities ahead of us. They may have nothing to do with our geography. They have everything to do with our character. It is time to begin.

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