

Statement by the Foreign Minister of the Republic of Estonia

Mr Urmas Paet at the First Session of the United Nations

Human Rights Council, 20 June 2006

Mr President,
Distinguished colleagues,
Excellencies,
Ladies and gentlemen,

First of all, I would like to congratulate you, Ambassador De Alba, upon your election as the first President of the Human Rights Council and commend you on your essential role in the consultations preceding it. I wish to assure you that you have our full support. While my delegation fully aligns itself with the statement on behalf of the European Union delivered by my Austrian Colleague, I would also like to offer the following remarks.

Undoubtedly, the creation of the Human Rights Council and the election of its first members was by itself a significant milestone on the road of the reform of the United Nations human rights machinery. The next step starts today, as the new Council needs to re-confirm this new beginning aimed at maintaining the highest possible standards in the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms.

In its work to promote human rights we encourage the Council to fully commit itself to the task of mainstreaming and effective coordination of human rights within the United Nations system, making recommendations, where necessary, to all relevant UN bodies.

Mr President,

It is essential to establish and preserve the integrity of the Human Rights Council, especially considering the high expectations vested in this new body. Estonia firmly believes that the Council's integrity greatly depends upon its ability and flexibility to deal with all human rights issues, including urgent matters. The holding of the HRC sessions throughout the year will certainly contribute to that goal, as will its close cooperation with the High Commissioner for Human Rights and the civil society. Moreover, the Council's integrity is

unquestionably rooted in the regular review of the human rights records of all countries, which will also be undergone by the entire membership of the HRC. This review will, however, only serve its purpose if carried out transparently, fairly and inclusively in an atmosphere of trust and cooperation.

We should keep in mind our goal of making the Council a forum for genuine dialogue and cooperation, enabling countries to receive assistance and advice. We should also ensure the consistency and focus on implementation in the Council's actions – as this is yet another basis of its integrity. Therefore, in our discussions on the HRC working methods, let us take a fresh approach. We should make use of various tools to tackle human rights issues, rather than concentrating on the adoption of repetitive and largely declarative texts. Follow-up to the Council's recommendations and decisions is an essential part in ensuring the consistency of its actions.

To meet these challenges the Human Rights Council also needs a continued input from its system of special procedures. Their valuable contribution so far can and has to be enhanced through a more substantial interactive dialogue. This dialogue, but also our discussions on the working methods and mechanisms of the HRC need to involve civil society organisations. It could well be complemented by input from the future system of expert advice, the exact nature and functioning of which have to be determined during the Council's first year of work.

Mr President,

Let me now continue with a subject that Estonia pays special attention to, namely the situation of indigenous peoples.

In our deliberations on the future of the Council we should make sure that the topic of the rights of indigenous peoples remains on its agenda. Furthermore, the indigenous peoples themselves should also be closely involved in the future discussions of the Council. This cooperation should begin already by ensuring the participation of the indigenous peoples' representatives, where necessary, in the foreseen review of the mandates, mechanisms, functions, and responsibilities of the Commission of Human Rights. Equally, the situation of indigenous peoples should be taken into consideration in the universal review process.

Considering the valuable contribution of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights and fundamental freedoms of indigenous peoples, we feel the Rapporteur's mandate should not only be extended and maintained, but also enhanced. And last but not least – with regard to the discussions on the Council's system of expert advice, I would like to call upon states to consider the inclusion of an indigenous expert into this mechanism.

Mr President,

Estonia supports the adoption, without delay, of the UN Draft declaration on the rights of indigenous peoples, the result of long-lasting discussions among governments and indigenous peoples. Although the text, as presented, might not fully accommodate all expectations, it certainly represents a good compromise establishing important standards to advance the rights of the world's indigenous peoples. Therefore we feel that it is of utmost importance to adopt the Draft declaration without further negotiations on its text, as also recommended by the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues.

Mr President,

The final topic I would like to address in the context of the issues the Human Rights Council should pay close attention to is the fight against trafficking of human beings. It has become a permanent agenda item at the meetings of a number of international organisations. And rightly so. However, there is a need for greater awareness of the seriousness and complexity of the issues connected with human trafficking. We also need to promote the understanding that effective action against it requires the cooperation of all countries as well as a coordinated international response.

The United Nations has paid significant attention to trafficking issues. The Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children, which supplements the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime, makes trafficking an explicit crime, giving the Convention a human rights focus. It is encouraging that, to date, already a hundred states have become party to the Protocol, having in this way shown their support and interest in fighting trafficking in human beings at the UN

level. However, we should keep in mind that the actual implementation of the instrument at the national level may yet pose serious challenges.

We appreciate the efforts and the report of Special Rapporteur Sigma Huda on the human rights aspects of the victims of trafficking in persons, especially women and children. We hope that all states will take into account its conclusions and recommendations aimed at improving the situation of a great number of persons susceptible to abuse all over the world.

Finally, Mr President, let me note that we are more than glad to welcome the entry into force of the Optional Protocol to the UN Convention against Torture on 22 June. Estonia has already begun the ratification process of the protocol, and we aim to ensure that this process is completed as expeditiously as possible.

Mr President,

The tasks ahead of the Human Rights Council are vast, but let its first session be an optimistic celebration of a new beginning, as much as it is a moment of assumption of great responsibility. I wish all present – the representatives of governments, international bodies and the civil society – success in our work at this session and in the ones to come.

Thank you for your attention!