



**Speech by the Special Representative of the Secretary General
Ad Melkert**

**Human Rights Day, Baghdad
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"Excellencies, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen – I welcome you today to this Human Rights Day event.

At its core, Human Rights Day is a celebration of humanity and the rights of individuals and communities that are based on universally accepted principles. It is a time to reflect on achievements and challenges, and an opportunity to renew, collectively, our commitments to making the world a safer and just place for all people. It is about remembering the importance of upholding principles of human rights despite political, cultural and religious diversity, in times of war and in times of peace, and recognizing the needs of the most vulnerable including refugees and IDPs.

Notable achievements towards improved monitoring of human rights have been realized in Iraq. At this time last year an amendment to the Electoral Law ensured the country's many minorities representation in Parliament. In June 2010, the country completed its first Universal Periodic Review. Initial ratification of the International Convention for the Protection of all Persons from Enforced Disappearance was made on 23 November, paving the way for the convention to come into force.

As in any country, challenges remain, particularly to a new, incoming government. The Independent High Commission for Human Rights, approved by law in 2008, is still awaiting appointment of commissioners, and a National Action Plan on Human Rights should be developed. As another example, legislation ratifying the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities must also be enacted.

Today coincides with the end of "16 days of Activism Against Violence Against Women" and as such provides an opportunity to reflect on broader goals for improving the rights of women to self determination, access to services, education and gainful employment. A draft law on Assistance for Women without Income must still be brought to a vote and meaningfully targeted programming supporting vulnerable women must be integrated into government, civil society and donor planning.

Atrocious recent events targeting in particular the Christian community remind us that work must still be done to ensure greater protection of Iraq's minorities against violence

and discrimination. Every day many Iraqis are victimized by violence intended to ignite sectarian conflict despite the deeply engrained conviction of most people that Iraqis can and should live together regardless of their background or beliefs. We have also witnessed the importance of improving the protection of journalists from violence, intimidation and threats, and the value of drafting laws protecting the freedom of expression.

Over the past year UNAMI has noted the challenges facing Iraq in its efforts to reform its detention systems, arguably one of the most difficult endeavors in any country emerging from decades of authoritarian government and conflict. Ensuring that conditions of detention conform to international standards for the treatment of prisoners is critically important to uphold essential principles of the rule of law. On this day we would like to reiterate our universal call to refrain from carrying out the death penalty and would encourage Iraq to consider banning this instrument as a fundamental feature of applying justice in a new Iraq.

In the program today we are enjoying a performance brought to us by children, and I would like to highlight in particular the tremendous burden that Iraq's youth continue to bear. UNAMI notes that while the security situation has improved over the past years, children routinely, and sometimes intentionally, bear the brunt of violence. Landmines, recruitment of children by militant groups, attacks on minorities and Iraqi Armed Forces, and violent events targeting civilian facilities have resulted in the deaths and maiming of hundreds of children this year. A child's right to protection is paramount and we must all, collectively, ensure that we are doing our part to defend it – through government legislation and rule of law structures, through funding and programming by the international community, and through civil society led peace-building initiatives at the community level.

UNAMI and the UN Agencies renew their commitment today to help Iraq's government and people meet their goals. We are grateful for the support from member states here with us today for making this possible. The UN has made it a priority to provide meaningful support to a national action plan for human rights. In line with our mandates, technical advice will continue to be given to Government and to the Independent High Commission on Human Rights, once established, on a range of human rights issues including the drafting of legislation. Capacity building initiatives and programmes with Government actors and members of civil society on human rights standards and their implementation will also be stepped up.

In closing I would like to congratulate the people of Iraq for their courage in the face of the many challenges and changes that have dramatically affected their lives over the past years. I would also like to take this opportunity again to commend political leaders and elected representatives for their successful efforts towards partnership and collective decision making during this period of government formation. The UN stands ready to support Iraq and its people as they continue to move forward towards the realization of their great potential."