

**Submission by Sunila Abeysekera, recipient of the UN Human Rights prize of 1998
and human rights defender in Sri Lanka**

22 June 2006, Geneva

Mr. Chairperson, Ladies and gentlemen,

At the onset, I thank Ambassador de Alba, the President of the Council, for the opportunity to speak at this inaugural session of the Human Rights Council. This is a historic moment, when as a part of the process of UN reforms, we are gathered here to launch the body within the UN that will from now on be responsible and accountable for the promotion and protection of all human rights of all. Enabling civil society voices to be heard on this occasion strengthens the commitment to the partnership of the UN with civil society and encourages us to hope that the Council will continue to be sensitive to issues of participation and consultation with civil society in the arena of human rights.

I also want to take a moment to honour the many victims and human rights defenders who made the Human Rights Council a reality.

Speaking for myself but also for my colleagues, men and women, human rights defenders in the Asia Pacific region, I welcome the creation of the Human Rights Council and the commitments made to a framework that is results-oriented and strong on implementation. As civil society activists for human rights and as human rights defenders we pledge our support for such a process.

The region I come from is diverse and rich in terms of culture, history and experiments with democracy and rights. We welcome the pledges submitted by our governments, but they are far from satisfactory in view of the enormous challenges on the ground. Given the gap between the promises and the reality of the suffering of human rights victims in the region, we hope that the pledges will be strengthened in the future. We also hope for a firm commitment to the early establishment of a regional human rights mechanism which will enable victims and survivors of human rights abuses to seek justice and reparation.

Without a regional mechanism, and low levels of treaty ratification, the Special Procedures system has been invaluable to human rights defenders in our part of the world as the space in which their voices can be heard and injustices redressed. We therefore call on all governments to ensure the maintenance and strengthening of the system of special procedures.

The people of the Asia and Pacific region confront a range of challenges when it comes to human rights. Struggling to keep the human rights perspective on issues such as trafficking and migration, on rights of people of diverse sexual orientation, on rights of indigenous peoples, on rights of people who suffer from discrimination on the grounds of race, caste, ethnicity, religion or any other status, on rights of people living with HIV/AIDS, on rights of refugees, asylum seekers and internally displaced persons presents us with complex challenges. Making a human rights based approach to development a reality for our people is perhaps as difficult to accomplish as it is to ensure

that gender mainstreaming addresses the core issue of gender inequality and unequal power relations between women and men. We look forward to working together with our governments as well as with the Council to confront these challenges. We pledge our support to the work that lies ahead in order to secure the adoption of the Draft International Convention on the Protection of Persons from Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances and the Draft Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

We also commit ourselves to work with the Council to incorporate human rights standards and frameworks in processes of conflict transformation and peace building in our region and in other parts of the world. As people engage in different kinds of struggles for democracy, autonomy and self-determination, human rights defenders seek protection of the rights of civilians caught in these conflicts as well as respect for norms and standards established in human rights and humanitarian law. We look forward to the Council creating modalities of incorporating the concerns set out in Security Council Resolution 1325 about the full participation of women in all aspects of peace building and conflict transformation as well as in Security Council Resolution 1674 on protection of civilians in conflict situations.

The Universal Periodic Review is a new and welcome measure through which the accountability of governments to human rights can be brought under scrutiny. We call on the Office of the High Commissioner of Human rights to create structures through which contributions of national and regional human rights defenders and organizations can be sought and transmitted to the members of the Council in this regard. In addition we hope that the OHCHR will ensure that the harmonization process will include consideration of recommendations and observations made by the Treaty Monitoring bodies and by the Special Procedures as inputs into the process of Universal Periodic Review.

In closing, once again, I speak with the voice of many millions of people in the Asia and Pacific region who yearn for justice and dignity and whose voices can only be heard by those who care to listen. We most fervently hope that the newly created UN Human Rights Council will live out its promise in real and substantive ways, helping us to combat discrimination and ensure the enjoyment of all human rights by all.