



Office of the Special Coordinator
for Lebanon

Bureau du Coordinateur Spécial
pour le Liban

Speech of Mr Michael C. Williams
Special Coordinator for Lebanon
(Under Secretary-General)
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Ladies and Gentlemen, friends,

I am glad to see so many of you today, especially so many young men and women from schools, universities and civil society organizations. We gather to celebrate perhaps one of the greatest achievements of mankind after the Second World War. Born 60 years ago out of the ashes of that devastating war, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights embodied the ambitions and aspirations for a more just and fair world. Together with the UN Charter, it constitutes one of the fundamental documents that keeps us focused on the core values and objectives for the UN's work around the world.

Lebanon has special reason to celebrate the 60th anniversary of the Universal Declaration. A prominent Lebanese philosopher, Dr. Charles Malek represented Lebanon at the San Francisco conference at which the United Nations was founded. He served as a rapporteur for the Commission on Human Rights in 1947 and 1948 and helped write the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. He called it "an international document of the first order of importance". Though Lebanon and the Lebanese have, throughout its history, contributed to modern civilisation in many different and original ways, I would argue that, as Lebanese, the intellectual and diplomatic efforts of Dr. Malek are most certainly one of the things to be most proud of. As I am sure you all know, Dr. Malek was a professor at AUB, a poignant reminder of how intellectual curiosity and an environment to nurture it are key to the development of great principles and ideas such as human rights.

As you know, the Declaration is not a treaty. But through time and thanks to its universal appeal, it has become accepted as customary international practice in which human rights are the centre of relations between governments and their citizens. It is a formidable instrument of moral pressure in international relations that compels us all to act and work in line with its principles. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights inspired numerous treaties and conventions that lay down these moral principles as legally binding obligations on States that voluntarily ratify and become contractual parties to them. Lebanon itself is participatory to the Covenant of Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, as well as the Covenant of Civil and Political Rights.

It is true that much remains to be done before we see a world free of rights violations, including torture and discrimination based on race, religion, gender or other basis. It is true that still too many people around the world, especially vulnerable groups such as women and children, are denied basic social and economic rights, such as access to water, housing, education and the possibility to live a life of dignity through work that is fairly retributed. Though we have achieved a lot from the early days of the Universal Declaration in meeting some of its prescriptions, we need to remain committed to its full realization and work harder for it.

For our part, the UN has made human rights one of its fundamental pillars. All of the UN programmes and activities are now guided by a rights-based approach to development. Whether we are working on improving childrens' access and quality of education in Latin America, advocating for women and civil society participation to public life in the Middle East or poverty reduction programmes in sub-saharan Africa, the UN is guided by human rights principles in promoting a model of sustainable development that empowers people and protects their fundamental rights.

In Lebanon, the UN works with government departments to strengthen access to basic social services, empower civil society, assist refugees and migrant workers. It also works through UNRWA to provide assistance to Palestinian refugees across twelve officially registered camps pending a just and desirable solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in line with existing Security Council resolutions. But the UN can only do so much to ensure human rights are respected here. The greater burden lies with you, the Lebanese, with your government, your involvement, your activism and

your good will. I am pleased to see progress in the work of the Parliamentary Human Rights Committee on the development of a human rights action plan. The UN is providing technical assistance to this endeavour and we are proud to be your partner. I hope one day soon, Lebanon will follow the example of many other nations around the world by establishing an independent national human rights institution, an invaluable instrument to strengthen the rule of law and the application of human rights.

Ladies and Gentlemen, friends,

This 60th anniversary of the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights is an important occasion to review progress made, and renew commitment to its noble principles. I will begin by renewing the United Nations's commitment to work with Lebanon, its government, institutions and civil society organizations, to make the promise of all human rights for all a reality, so that Lebanon can continue to be, as it began, a leading voice for human rights in this region.