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FROM THE UN

Rights call a dead letter

UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon has told the international community that it has not lived up to the vision held in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights as he marked the 60th anniversary of the landmark document. He said in a video message that the declaration is at the core of the UN identity, since "it reflects humanity's aspirations for prosperity, dignity and peaceful coexistence".

The declaration was adopted by the UN General Assembly 60 years ago in 1948. It said everyone has the right to life, liberty and security and that all regardless of race, gender, colour, sex, language, religion or opinion are equal before the law. "Since I took office as secretary-general, I have been very humbled and saddened by having seen so many people whose human rights are being abused and not properly protected," Mr Ban said. "We see human trafficking, the exploitation of children, and a host of other ills plaguing millions of people." He added that despite "all the lessons we profess to have learned, shocking acts of brutality against innocent people often go unanswered".

Mr Ban also paid tribute to the individuals who risk their lives defending the rights of others around the world, including human rights experts, lawyers and journalists, as well as "ordinary people who find extraordinary courage and stand up for what is rightfully theirs, yours, mine and ours". Challenges threatening human rights around the world include the global financial crisis, the food emergency and "humankind's assault on the natural environment", he said. Mr Ban stressed that "there is political repression in too many countries, and, as ever, the most vulnerable continue to be on the frontlines of hardship and abuse".

High Commissioner for Human Rights Navi Pillay brought her own focus to the issue as victim and nemesis of abuse. "I was told things like 'White secretaries can't take instructions from a Black person'," Ms Pillay said. She recalled growing up in apartheid-era South Africa when she wanted to become a lawyer in a society stratified by institutionalised racial discrimination. But she persevered, completed her studies and was taken on as an intern by a Black lawyer. She opened a practice of her own in 1967, not out of choice, but because nobody would employ a coloured woman lawyer.

Ms Pillay had challenged laws that permitted

torture and unlawful methods of interrogation, leading to better conditions for all those imprisoned on Robben Island, including Mr Nelson Mandela. She was on the other side of the bar, meting out justice to the Hutu extremist perpetrators of the massacre of thousands of Tutsis and moderate Hutus as President of the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda. "I came to know in painful detail, killing by killing, the unimaginable destruction of humanity when ethnic hatred exploded into genocide," she said. "I know that the consequences of allowing discrimination, inequality and intolerance to fester and spiral out of control can have



genocidal consequences."

And how does the world appear today after a century marked by so much bloodletting, torture and persecution? "Impunity, armed conflict and authoritarian rule have not been defeated," she said. "One of the main challenges I face, like my predecessors, is to get the international community to take human rights seriously. When I leave this job, I would like to be able to say that I've made a real difference in some people's lives, because the organisation I head has functioned to its full potential."