ADDRESS BY THE HIGH COMMISSIONER AT THE JACOB BLAUSTEIN INSTITUTE FOR THE ADVANCEMENT OF HUMAN RIGHTS

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I am very pleased to join you at this conference marking the 40th anniversary of the Jacob Blaustein Institute for the Advancement of Human Rights. I am honored to address you in the house where Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt lived. They and other founders of the modern human rights movement have left us with a legacy that continues to flourish despite seemingly immutable ideologies.

Indeed, the human rights movement keeps expanding in jurisprudence and action. Much is due to the intuitions and advocacy of visionaries, such as Jacob Blaustein, who believed firmly in the need for a United Nations human rights program. Due also to the efforts of organizations such as the Jacob Blaustein Institute, the General Assembly created the post of High Commissioner for Human Rights in 1993 to spearhead the protection and promotion of human rights globally.

Let me note that each High Commissioner made his or her own mark as the Office evolved.

• The first High Commissioner, José Ayala Lasso, built the foundation of the new Office, expanding the focus of the then Centre for Human Rights from supporting intergovernmental and expert human rights mechanisms, including the Commission on Human Rights, special rapporteurs and human rights treaty bodies, to technical cooperation, as well as education activities in the field.

• The second High Commissioner, Mary Robinson, further institutionalized these avenues for action and strengthened the High Commissioner’s advocacy role. To this day, her insistence on one of the central messages of the World Conference on Human Rights that civil and political rights
and economic, social and cultural rights constitute an indivisible whole continues to resonate and inform the debate.

- The third High Commissioner, Sergio Vieira de Mello, was instrumental in moving forward the process of engaging the larger UN system on human rights issues, until his work was sadly cut short by a fatal bomb attack. It fell upon the acting High Commissioner, Bertrand Ramcharan, who is with us today, to pursue a wide-ranging agenda, continue to build the capacity of the Office and draw the attention of the Commission on Human Rights to human rights situations warranting its consideration.

- Subsequently, High Commissioner Louise Arbour led the Office through a period of great change. Her exceptional drive and strategic thinking led to a reform of the Office and its expansion into the field. At the same time, she tirelessly advocated the centrality of human rights and accountability including during the delicate period of transition from the Commission to the Human Rights Council.

The combined efforts of its leaders led to the Office growing from the small headquarters-based Centre for Human Rights – with some 106 staff and a biennial budget of $31 million at the end of 1993 – to the current structure with 1,108 employees. Currently, 48 per cent of OHCHR staff is based in the field, 50 per cent in Geneva, and 2 per cent in New York. In 2010–2011, our budget was US$ 408 million. We have established 12 regional offices or centers and 13 country or stand-alone offices. Further, 15 human rights officers serve in UN peace missions and 18 human rights advisers are embedded within UN Country Teams in the field. In all, OHCHR has presences in 58 countries.

The impact of OHCHR advocacy has grown steadily throughout the past 19 years. Let me highlight the celebrations of Human Rights Day last December. We ran a ‘Celebrate Human Rights’ social media campaign which engaged a rapidly expanding online audience. The campaign, in particular the global social media human rights conversation I hosted and the ‘30 Days and 30 Rights’ multilingual discussion on the 30 articles of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, helped us reach tens of millions of previously untapped audience. On Twitter alone, our messages and tweets were viewed 27 million times and the hashtag #AskRights my Office created was used six million times, within 48 hours of the event. Some were inspired to take action for human rights. For example, a reputable publisher, using hashtag #AskRights, offered everyone seven days free access to its database for human rights research to celebrate Human