

UN HIGH COMMISSIONER FOR HUMAN RIGHTS HAILS INAUGURATION OF INTERNATIONAL CRIMINAL COURT AS "HISTORIC MILESTONE"

11 March 2003

Following is the statement of United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights Sergio de Mello on the occasion of the inauguration of the International Criminal Court:

The inauguration of the International Criminal Court today is a historic milestone that brings to fruition the collective efforts of the international community to establish a universal framework to end impunity for the most serious crimes under international law. This occasion also represents a reaffirmation of our commitment to human rights, fundamental freedoms and justice.

Successive generations have for over a century progressively weaved an impressive fabric of legal and moral standards based on respect for the dignity of the individual. But the Court is the first and only permanent international body with the power to bring to justice individuals -- whoever they are -- responsible for the worst violations of human rights and international humanitarian law. We are finally acquiring the tools to translate fine-sounding words into action

The importance of the Court in the fight against impunity and in preventing gross human rights violations cannot be overemphasized. It represents a significant development of the principle of universal jurisdiction for serious international crimes. With the creation of this Court, there will no longer be any place for offenders to hide. And potential violators will now have to think twice before committing abuses.

But to make the Court truly effective wider acceptance of its jurisdiction will be necessary. So far, 89 countries have ratified the Rome Statute, far from universality. We must also remember that States retain the primary right, opportunity and obligation to prosecute and punish individuals for serious violations of human rights and international humanitarian law. All States that have ratified the Statute should enact the necessary national implementing legislation. The existence of national laws and procedures to facilitate cooperation will be a crucial element in the ability of the Court to carry out its functions.

I wish the 18 judges of the Court and their colleagues success in facing the tremendous challenges that lie ahead, and I congratulate all those whose tireless efforts made possible today's momentous event.

<http://www.unhchr.ch/hurricane/hurricane.nsf/view01/754D64DEC9105E11C1256CE6004829D4?opendocument>