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THE SECRETARY-GENERAL

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**KEYNOTE ADDRESS AT HIGH-LEVEL MEETING
ON REFORM AND TRANSITIONS TO DEMOCRACY
Beirut, 15 January 2012**

Prime Minister Mikati, thank you for joining us for this important gathering, held under the auspices of ESCWA and also the Government of Lebanon.

And our great thanks again to Rima Khalaf and the four regional commissions for bringing us together.

Ladies and gentlemen,

The remarkable events of the past year transformed the region and changed the world.

It was a story written by people – but the story has just begun.

Those who believe in a future of freedom and dignity must now come together and help the people of the region and their leaders to write the next chapters.

That is why we are here today.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Six centuries ago, the famous Arab philosopher, Ibn Khaldun, offered a clear warning to those in power. Leaders can lead only with the will of the people.

Those who wield power by force or coercion bring about their own downfall, he said. Sooner or later, they are abandoned by their people.

That in a nutshell is the history of 2011 and it may go on this year and on.

From the very beginning of the last year's revolutions, from Tunisia through Egypt and beyond, I called on leaders to listen to their people, listen to the genuine aspirations of their people, what do they need and what are their voices. Some did, and benefitted. Some did not, and today they are reaping the whirlwind.

And today, I say again to President Assad of Syria: Stop the violence. Stop killing your own people. The path of repression is a dead end.

The lessons of the past year are eloquent and clear:

The winds of change will not cease to blow. The flame ignited in Tunisia will not be dimmed.

Let us remember, as well: none of these great changes began with a call for a regime change.

First and foremost, people wanted dignity.

They want an end to corruption. They want a say in their future. They want jobs and justice, a fair share of political power. They want their human rights.

For too long, Arabs stood on the sidelines. They watched as others threw off tyranny – in Europe, Asia and Africa. They asked: why not us? Why so little democracy in a part of the world so rich in human potential?

Now their time has come. Now your time has come.

The old way, the old order, is crumbling one-man rule and the perpetuation of family dynasties, monopolies of wealth and power, the silencing of the media, the deprivation of fundamental freedoms that are the birthright of men, women and children on this planet.

To all of this, the people say: enough! Enough is enough.

This is cause to celebrate, and much more. The spontaneous, homegrown and non-violent movements are a credit to the Arab people.

They are also rebuke to those, Arab and non-Arab alike, who claimed this part of the world is not ready for democracy.

But, it has been hard. The cost in human suffering and loss of life has been so large.

These great changes also come at a time of global economic difficulty. In fact, in many cases they compounded the effects.

Commerce has been hurt. Unemployment is rising. So is the cost of fuel and food. Families everywhere are struggling.

Meanwhile, old elites remain entrenched, the levers of coercion remain in their hands.

Long-term hope coexists with short-term worry. We have reached a sober moment.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Democracy is not easy. It takes time and effort to build. It does not come into being

with one or two elections. Yet there is no going back.

I see four prerequisites for success:

First, reform must be real and genuine.

Too often, changes are cosmetic. They give the appearance of democracy without substance, without a shift of real power to the people.

The people do not seek authoritarianism with a human face. People want meaningful changes in security services and armed forces. These should serve the people, not keep them down.

They want a virtuous circle of rights and opportunity under the rule of law, a vibrant civil society and an enterprising private sector, backed by efficient and accountable state institutions.

Second, inclusive dialogue is crucial.

Diversity is a strength. We must oppose those who exploit ethnic or social differences for political gain.

It is sometimes said that authoritarian regimes, whatever else their faults, at least kept a lid on sectarian conflict. This is a cruel canard. Yet it could be equally mistaken to assume that all of the new regimes now emerging will automatically uphold universal human rights.

We must work together to promote pluralism and protect the rights of minorities and the vulnerable. The new regimes must not elevate certain religious or ethnic communities at the expense of others.

Third, women must be at the centre of the region's future.

Women stood in the streets and squares demanding changes. They now have a right to sit at the table, real influence in decision-making and governance.

Protection from violence, intimidation and abuse is a fundamental matter of human dignity and equality. Sexual violence, discrimination, violence against women are not acceptable.

More, they are universal rights they are not, as some may claim, values that are “imposed” from outside. The deficit in women's empowerment has held back the Arab region for too long.

Change is not merely necessary, it is essential, and there must be changes.

There can be no democracy worthy of the name without women.

Fourth, we must heed the voices of the young.

Arab countries need to create 50 million new jobs within the next decade to absorb young entrants to the workforce. This profound demographic pressure drove the Arab Spring. Faced with bleak prospects and unresponsive governments, young Arabs acted on their own to reclaim their future.

They have not finished the job.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Let us recognize that dignity and justice are threatened not only by authoritarian rule, but also by conflict.

The Israeli occupation of Arab and Palestinian territories must end. So must violence against civilians. Settlements, new and old, are illegal. They work against the emergence of a viable Palestinian state.

A two-State solution is long overdue. The status quo offers only the guarantee of future conflict.

We must all do our part to break the impasse and secure a lasting peace.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Much depends on us. Much depends upon you.

There can be no economic recovery and development without international support.

And we all have much to offer in these delicate political transitions.

Now is the moment to share best practices and lessons learned during similar transitions elsewhere.

We thank the leaders from Asia, Africa, Europe and Latin America who are here to do just that.

We must also move beyond the assumptions that have traditionally governed relationships between Arab countries and their partners.

Among these is the dangerous idea that security is somehow more important than human rights.

This has had the effect of keeping non-democratic states in power – with little to show for either security or people's well-being or human rights.

The United Nations also has a responsibility to update its approach to the region.

Our Arab Human Development Reports broke new ground in frankly diagnosing the region's problems, deficits in democracy, knowledge, women's empowerment and human security.

But those reports were not fully integrated into our work.

Looking to the future, we know that business as usual, business as it has always been done, will no longer suffice.

As I begin my second term as Secretary-General of the United Nations, I want to emphasize that the United Nations will be always here for you and with you.

We are firmly committed to help Arab countries through this transition, by every means.

Our assistance mission in Libya (UNSMIL) is supporting the interim authorities in three key priorities: elections, transitional justice and public security.

In Tunisia, our engagement focuses on electoral assistance, the empowerment of civil society and protection of human rights.

A UN mediator has been at the heart of negotiations in Yemen. I call again on President Saleh to abide by the terms of the agreement he has signed.

UN Women is active in Egypt and Tunisia.

The UN Democracy Fund is helping to strengthen civil society.

The Department of Political Affairs of the United Nations and UNDP are working together to support free and fair elections.

This is just a small sample of what we at the United Nations are doing. The UN system is fully engaged, the UN and its staff are dedicated to your future.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Let me close by noting this important anniversary: on January 14, yesterday, one year ago, Tunisia's president-for-life, Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, stepped down in the face of the popular uprising against him.

A few months later, I went to Tunisia and met the family of the man who set these events in motion, Mohamed Bouazizi. His mother when I met her, in tears, told me of her son's anger at being unable to care for his family, his anger at being robbed of his worth as a human being. She said, "I will not be sad anymore - I will just be proud." This is what she told me.

Since then I have travelled widely elsewhere in the region.

In Cairo I met with the leaders of the revolution in Tahrir Square. In Tripoli, I stood in a warehouse where Muamar Qadaffi executed his political opponents.

And I have met or spoken with Arab leaders of every country, at UN headquarters in New York, in their own capitals, or [by] telephone at summits around the world.

In all this, I have come to one inescapable conclusion: there cannot be a gulf between rulers and the ruled. The wider the gap, the greater the certainty of social unhappiness, even of conflict.

This is true throughout the world, not just in Arab world.

Let us listen to our people.

Let us live by cherished principle of mutual respect and tolerance for difference.

At this moment of history, let us work together to build prosperous and open societies throughout the Arab world, founded in fairness, justice and opportunity for all.

Let us work together to make this better for all regardless of religion, regardless of sex, regardless of ethnicity, poor and rich, small and big. That's the priority of United Nations. And I count on your support, and let's work together, and join together toward that goal. Thank you very much.

Shukran Jazilan.