Address by Mr Koïchiro Matsuura,
Director-General of UNESCO,
on the occasion of the official launch of UNESCO’s activities
for the sixtieth anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights

UNESCO, 10 December 2007

Excellencies,

Ladies and gentlemen,

It is a great honour for me to welcome you to UNESCO as we launch the celebrations of the sixtieth anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

As you know, this is a particularly solemn time for our Organization, whose main purpose under its Constitution is to contribute “to peace and security by promoting collaboration among the nations through education, science and culture in order to further universal respect for justice, for the rule of law and for the human rights and fundamental freedoms which are affirmed for the peoples of the world”.

Today, too, the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights in Geneva is launching the cycle of ceremonies that will be held throughout 2008 to mark the anniversary of the Universal Declaration. We are taking an active part in it, and today’s meeting is our first contribution to this joint United Nations endeavour. I should indeed like to express my gratitude to Mr Bacre Ndiaye who is here today as Ms Louise Arbour’s representative.

Allow me too to express my most sincere thanks to our guests, who have accepted the invitation to come here today.
First of all, I should like to thank Mr Michel Doucin, Ambassador for Human Rights and representative of the French Republic. We welcome, in your person, the voice of France, the country of the 1789 Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen.

I should also like to extend a warm welcome to two stalwart champions in the recent history of human rights who have agreed to share with us their thoughts on the issues and challenges arising from the Universal Declaration of Human Rights: Ambassador Héctor Gros Espiell, Permanent Delegate of Uruguay to UNESCO, and Professor Karel Vašák.

Lastly, allow me to thank the various experts who will speak about the future of rights in UNESCO’s fields of competence: Ms Virginia Bonoan Dandan, member of the United Nations Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights; Ms Camilla Croso, general coordinator of the Latin American Campaign for the Right to Education (CLADE); Ms Yvonne Donders, Deputy Director of the Amsterdam Centre for International Law, and Mr Kwamé Karikari, Executive Director of the Media Foundation for West Africa.

Ladies and gentlemen,

We are all required today to redouble our efforts to achieve the common ideal proclaimed in 1948 by the United Nations General Assembly, convened in Paris at the Palais de Chaillot.

This individual mobilization demands first of all a solemn reaffirmation of the indivisible and universal value of the rights enshrined in the Declaration.

UNESCO, for its part, was established out of the conviction that lasting peace could only be founded upon the intellectual and moral solidarity of humanity and on respect for human rights and justice.

Sixty years on, it is useful for an organization such as ours, which has adopted more than 30 conventions, recommendations and declarations relating to human rights, to reconsider critically and lucidly the relevance of the various rights falling within our fields of competence.
The right to education, crucial to the achievement of genuine education for all and necessary to guarantee full participation of all in the political, economic and cultural life of society, is the first to spring to mind. In that regard, our action must continue to be guided by the promotion of the UNESCO Convention against Discrimination in Education (1960).

Yet another is the right to take part in cultural life, now recognized as a priority since we live in increasingly multicultural societies that wish to win recognition for their identities, languages and traditions. Here too, I am pleased to note that instruments such as the 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage and the 2005 Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions can help us to strengthen these rights today.

I now turn, with renewed emphasis, to the right to freedom of opinion and expression. UNESCO, the only United Nations agency mandated to defend freedom of expression and freedom of the press, is indeed mindful of the daily tested need to watchfully defend universal rights that are indispensable to the sustainable construction of free, democratic societies. With this prominent in my mind, I shall travel to Maputo, Mozambique, on 3 May 2008 to award the UNESCO-Guillermo Cano World Press Freedom Prize on the occasion of World Press Freedom Day.

Lastly, I must mention the right to enjoy the benefits and applications of scientific progress. This is a major concern of modern societies that are faced with extremely rapid scientific and technological revolutions which have legal and ethical effects that are drastically changing our daily lives. There too, UNESCO, which has placed the ethics of science and technology, and in particular bioethics, at the heart of its priorities for several years now, must continue to be bold and alert.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Much progress has been made in all of these fields. We must, however, do more than list achievements, however valuable they may be.
First, many issues, grey areas and unregulated matters are still topical. Here, I refer in particular to the progress yet to be made regarding girls’ right to education, and gender equality, protection of minority rights and access to and sharing of natural resources such as fresh water.

Second, we must continue to give thought to developments in the law and to those “emerging rights” that generally challenge our understanding of the world and reflect new social and political demands from societies. The fields of health, food, bioethics, housing and the environment thus call for careful reflection on our part.

Last, I remain persuaded that our efforts will all be to no avail if we do not give high overriding priority to human rights education. Accordingly, we must consider such education, which takes into account the contemporary requirements of measured dialogue among cultures and religions and ethical concerns linked to scientific developments, in a new light. This is a vast project to which UNESCO will make a substantial contribution, in particular by making revised textbooks and innovative methodologies available to teachers.

To take up all of these challenges, UNESCO has drawn up a plan of action, which will be implemented throughout 2008 in close cooperation with the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights and the United Nations system as a whole.

The plan, which will be refined further in consultation with all Member States, as requested by the General Conference at its 34th session, will afford us an opportunity to rally all of our partners.

It enables us right now to envisage many regional activities, with particular emphasis on human rights education and the future of human rights in the light of new social and ethical challenges. I am also pleased to announce that the focus of the 61st annual conference of NGOs, which will be held in September 2008 at UNESCO in partnership with the United Nations Department of Public Information, will be the sixtieth anniversary of the Universal Declaration.

Naturally, I hope that all Member States, National Commissions for UNESCO and all of our partners will actively help us to implement the many and specific activities scheduled in the plan of action.
Ladies and gentlemen,

It remains for me now to urge you to remain true to the ideals of the 1948 Universal Declaration.

It is a text that enshrines the indivisibility of political, social and economic human rights. Moreover, it helps us to think anew about the centrality of the concept of human dignity. Whenever human rights are violated, it is in fact human dignity, namely that portion of humanity that inheres in each person, which is denied.

I cannot conclude in a finer way than by now inviting Professor Héctor Gros Espiell and Professor Karel Vašák to join me, as I have the great honour of awarding to each of them, on behalf of UNESCO, a medal symbolizing their invaluable contribution to human rights and our profound gratitude for the work that they have accomplished coactively with UNESCO in this field.

**Professor Héctor Gros Espiell**, you are the Ambassador and Permanent Delegate of Uruguay to UNESCO. An eminent expert in international law, you have been Minister of Foreign Affairs, President of the Inter-American Court of Human Rights and member of UNESCO’s International Bioethics Committee, in which you played a key role during the drafting of the 1997 Universal Declaration on the Human Genome and Human Rights.

**Mr Ambassador, I have the honour of awarding to you the UNESCO Aristotle silver medal.**

*The Director-General awards the Aristotle silver medal*

**Professor Karel Vašák**, you are an internationally recognized specialist in human rights. You were the first Secretary-General of the International Institute of Human Rights in Strasbourg founded by René Cassin, the Director of UNESCO’s Division of Human Rights and Peace from 1976 to 1981 and a ground-breaking theorist of the international dimension of human rights.

Professor, I hereby award you the UNESCO Gandhi silver medal.

*The Director-General awards the Gandhi silver medal*
On this opening day of the sixtieth anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, I therefore solemnly appeal to everyone, international organizations, local and national authorities, teachers, scientific and artistic communities and non-governmental organizations, to take action to ensure that this anniversary is a resounding success.

I hope that many initiatives will be taken all over the world and that the Universal Declaration of Human Rights will indeed come to symbolize a world of dignity and justice for all.

Thank you for your attention.

Koïchiro Matsuura