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SECRETARY-GENERAL APPLAUDS PETITION WITH TEN MILLION SIGNATURES SUPPORTING UNIVERSAL DECLARATION OF HUMAN RIGHTS

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Tells Anniversary Event in Paris, 'Tidal Wave' Response Shows Strength Of Partnership Between United Nations, Civil Society and Private Sector

This is the text of a statement by Secretary-General Kofi Annan at the Palais de Chaillot in Paris this evening, at a ceremony marking the 50th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights where he received from the Secretary-General of Amnesty International a book representing 10 million signatures in favour of human rights:

I am overwhelmed at this response. The tidal wave of these signatures tells us that for this anniversary, the people have spoken; 10 million have indeed got up, signed up and made their mark for human rights. Amnesty International and The Body Shop deserve all our thanks and admiration for making this happen. This movement, in which people have voted with their pens, their computers and their fingerprints, reflects many times over the true universality of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

First, these signatures -- coming as they do from all corners of the world -- spring from as many cultures and countries as did the inspiration and the people behind the drafting of the Declaration itself half a century ago. The document was the product of debates among a uniquely representative group of scholars, most of them from the non-Western world. They brought to their historic assignment the recent memories of world war and the ancient teachings, found in all the world's great cultural and religious traditions, of tolerance, fraternity and universal peace.

Second, this event reflects the fact that over the course of half a century, we have taken our work for human rights out of the conference room and into the countries, cities and villages of the world. As we meet here today, in the very building where the Declaration was signed, signatures are also being handed over to United Nations field offices worldwide. More and more of those offices are working to promote and protect human

rights -- joining forces with invaluable organizations such as Amnesty. The High Commissioner for Human Rights, Mary Robinson, and her team are currently providing technical assistance in no fewer than 58 countries.

Third, this campaign illustrates the growing strength of the global partnership between the United Nations, civil society and the private sector.

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I have high hopes for what this partnership can achieve in the years to come. This is the new reality -- this is the new diplomacy.

Finally, the campaign has shown that electronic communications have truly become the tool of the people. In the service of movements like yours, any desktop can become a doorway to human decency. This is what happens when individuals are united by an unbending conviction and weapons as mighty as any we have seen this century: E-mail and the Internet.

In 1997, those same weapons helped civil society bring about a ban on anti-personnel landmines. In this year of human rights, they enabled non-governmental organizations to play a key role in the establishment of the International Criminal Court. I hope you will keep governments on their toes in 1999 and beyond.

Here in Paris, right now, some 300 activists from 100 countries are doing just that. They are meeting to call on governments to help human rights defenders under attack. Half a century after governments had their say in the Universal Declaration, the Defenders' Summit declaration will give voice to these exceptionally brave people -- lawyers, reporters, trade unionists, ordinary men and women -- who risk their freedom or even their lives to promote and uphold the rights of us all. We owe it to them, these defenders of our freedom, to do all we can to defend theirs. At long last, the pressure on governments has paid off.

Tomorrow, 14 years after it was first proposed, the General Assembly will adopt a declaration setting out the rights of defenders and obliging States to protect them from violence, threats, retaliation, discrimination or any other arbitrary action. This official recognition is long overdue.

This global petition for pledges has been an appeal to the conscience of the world. We see the answer before us here today: 10 million names and fingerprints. We see the world saying yes to human rights. We hear a rousing and resounding pledge to do good, instead of a sullen and silent protest against evil. We witness 10 million people lighting candles together, rather than cursing the darkness alone.

My 30 years in the United Nations have taught me that the international community is strongest when, in the first words of the United Nations Charter, it truly gives voice to "We the peoples". That when we pull together from all corners of the world to change something, we usually can do it.

When 10 million people say "I will do everything in my power to ensure that the rights in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights become a reality throughout the world", the chances are that they will be heard. When they pledge to do everything in their power, chances are they will do something very powerful indeed. I would urge those who have not yet understood this to listen very carefully today.

For this is a day when the peoples of the world found common ground again. This is a day when the people have spoken, and they have spoken as one. This is a day when they have put our conscience on notice. We ignore them at our peril. * *** *