



## Record number of countries sign UN treaty on disabilities on opening day

30 March 2007 – Eighty-one Member States and the European Community [signed](#) a landmark new treaty today at the United Nations that aims to improve the lives of the world's estimated 650 million people with disabilities, a record for the first day of signature of any convention.

Jamaica also ratified the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities – the first country to go beyond endorsement and adopt it as law. The pact, the fastest negotiated international human rights instrument in history, needs 19 more States Parties to enter into force.

Some 44 countries signed the Optional Protocol to the Convention, which will give individuals recourse to an expert committee on the rights of persons with disabilities when all national options have been exhausted.

The Convention outlaws discrimination against persons with disabilities in all areas of life, including employment, education, health services, transportation and access to justice.

It requires that public spaces and buildings be accessible to persons with disabilities, and calls for improvements to information and communications infrastructure.

UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Louise Arbour told a press briefing in New York that the drive and commitment of the disability community was the greatest impetus behind the treaty's content and relatively rapid adoption.

"It is very appropriate [that] it targets a community that has been marginalized for so long," she said. "The most important thing is to recognize that where we are today is already a testimony to the empowerment of a community which has a long history of disempowerment."

Yannis Vardakastanis of the International Disability Caucus called the Convention "a very drastic paradigm shift in the way the international community looks at disability."

He said the pact should bring real changes in the daily lives of people living with disabilities, helping to take away the discrimination, exclusion and obstacles they routinely face.

"Allow me to quote the German poet Bertolt Brecht: 'Some there are who live in darkness/while the others live in light/we see those who live in daylight/those in darkness out of sight.' This is a Convention to bring those in darkness into light."

Deputy Secretary-General Asha-Rose Migiro told a ceremony at UN Headquarters in New York that "in three short years, the Convention went from dream to reality" to become the first human rights treaty of the century.

She added that fewer than 50 nations currently have specific legislation protecting people with disabilities. "I know we can do better," she said.

Addressing the same gathering, General Assembly President Sheikha Haya Rashed Al Khalifa described the adoption of the Convention as “a historic event not only for persons with disabilities, but also for the promotion of the human rights agenda at the United Nations.”

Sheikha Haya – who spoke by video message from the Middle East, where she is on an official visit – called for a change in values and cultural attitudes towards the disabled to match the legal changes embodied in the Convention.