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THE SECRETARY-GENERAL

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**MESSAGE ON THE INTERNATIONAL DAY
FOR THE ELIMINATION OF VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN
25 November 2004**

Violence against women is global in reach, and takes place in all societies and cultures, affecting women no matter what their race, ethnicity, social origin, property, birth or other status may be.

Gender-based violence is particularly pervasive in situations of armed conflict, when women and girls become victims of rape and other forms of sexual abuse, and are vulnerable to trafficking. Last May, in an important step towards ending the impunity with such crimes are committed, the Trial Chamber of the Special Court for Sierra Leone approved a motion to add a new count of "forced marriage" to indictments against six defendants. Thus, for the first time, forced marriage will be prosecuted as a crime against humanity.

Violence against women is a challenge in itself, but comes with an added deadly dimension: the risk of HIV infection. Sexual violence increases women's vulnerability to the virus. All too frequently, the threat of violence forces women to have unprotected sex. Violence can also make it impossible for women to seek information, follow treatment or even raise the subject for discussion.

The Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, the human rights treaty body that monitors implementation of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, continues to play a dynamic role in ensuring that this issue is a high priority for the international community. The Optional Protocol to the Convention gives women and groups of women the right to petition, and has the potential to become a highly effective tool for addressing gender-based violence and other violations of women's human rights.

On this fifth International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women, let us be encouraged that there is a growing understanding of the problem. But let us also pledge to do our utmost to protect women, banish such violence, and build a world in which women enjoy their rights and freedoms on an equal basis with men.