

**Speech by Nils Jansons, Deputy Head of the EU Delegation to South Africa
at the graduation ceremony of Master of Laws in Human Rights
University of Pretoria, 9th December 2011**

Dear Graduates,
Ladies, gentlemen,
distinguished guests and,
as they say in South Africa "all protocol observed".

It is a real pleasure to be at the University of Pretoria, as last year, in this distinguished and inspiring company, on the eve of International Human Rights Day.

I am glad that we – the European Union – have been able to support the Master of Law in Human Rights and Democratization in Africa since 2004. Over these years many law graduates will have completed the degree in Human rights, and today you join this extensive alumni network of lawyers active across the continent.

Events in the Arab World – social media

It has been a year like no other for human rights. The Arab Spring has been a wake-up call for many. Citizens in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Bahrain, Yemen, Syria and indeed many other countries have sent a strong message to leaders, not just in their countries but across the world.

The message is that people everywhere aspire to live in dignity and freedom; that you can not fool all the people all the time; that leaders can not forever put the lid on the legitimate aspirations of the people. In 2011 thousands of people decided that the time had come to claim their rights.

The internet revolution and the speedy development of twitter and facebook have accelerated this process. The theme of this year's International Human Rights day, the role of social media and the internet, could not be better chosen. The social media have empowered people. It has carried their message, and has allowed activists and individuals to break free from isolation, to disseminate ideas and to denounce oppression. This is something that informs also your work, as future human rights lawyers.

EU reaction

The extent and fervour of these revolutions has nevertheless surprised many. And I admit the European Union is no exception to this rule. But once the first surprise passed, we reacted strongly, supporting the wish of the people in our neighbourhood to enjoy the same freedoms that we take as our right.

The European Union was the first to offer a serious, coherent response to the Arab Spring, adapting our strategy towards our partner countries.

Firstly, it is the introduction of an *incentive-based approach* based on more differentiation ("more for more"): those that go further and faster with reforms will be able to count on greater support from the European Union. We are offering our partners closer political association, assistance in economic and social reforms, progressive economic integration with the EU internal market, improved mobility of people and financial support. The EU will

withdraw support where regimes have chosen to oppress their people rather than follow the path of reform, and we have done so already.

Secondly, we have enhanced our support to civil society: A thriving civil society can help uphold human rights and contribute to democracy building and good governance, playing an important role in checking government excesses. Hence, the European Union has strengthened and substantially stepped up its partnership with and support to civil society in its neighbourhood, particularly in Tunisia, Libya and Egypt.

Thirdly, we will foster more people-to-people contacts, through Mobility Partnerships to ensure that the movement of persons between the EU and our partner countries is well-managed and mutually beneficial.

International reaction

The Arab Spring also called for a strong and unified reaction by the international community at large.

This has not always proven to be an easy thing. The famous 1973 resolution on Libya imposing a no-fly zone on Libya and authorising UN Member States to take "all necessary measures to protect civilians" has sparked debate in many countries, not least South Africa. We now hope to be able to look forward and work together to tackle the challenge of reconciliation and the rebuilding of the Libyan society and economy – something South Africa itself had to face in building its own vibrant democracy.

Today, the international community faces another major challenge in Syria. The UN General Assembly and the UN Human Rights Council in recent weeks have sent a strong message of support for the Syrian people, in their quest for dignity and freedom, to decide the future of their country through peaceful, democratic as well as non sectarian means. We welcome these resolutions and in particular the Arab support for them.

The UN Security Council, with participation of South Africa, should also be prepared to exercise its responsibility. Opposing international action in situations where human rights are violated in large scale does not bring us closer to a just and peaceful world.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Future human rights defenders,

It is against this challenging background that you graduate today. It will be up to you to further this important cause, to show commitment and energy for an ideal that we all cherish. And if we have learned something this year, that is that change *is indeed* possible.

As we are in South Africa, I would like to close with a quote from Nelson Mandela, arguably the greatest moral political leader of our time: "Let freedom reign. The sun never set on so glorious a human achievement."

I wish you the very best of luck.

Thank you.