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UN chief Ban urges single world agency for women

Fri Mar 9, 2007 8:37 AM GMT

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By Michelle Nichols

UNITED NATIONS (Reuters) - U.N. Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon urged the world body on Thursday to create a single agency to empower women and girls and fight for their rights.

In an address to mark International Women's Day, Ban said the 192-member United Nations should take the lead in the global battle with a fully funded new agency that combines the work currently done by three different U.N. bodies.

"Such a new body should be able to call on all of the U.N. system's resources in the work to empower women and realize gender equality worldwide," Ban said. "It should mobilize forces of change at the global level and inspire enhanced results at the country level."

A U.N. panel recommended in November that the U.N. Development Fund for Women, the U.N. Division for the Advancement of Women, and the Office of the Special Adviser on Gender Issues be combined into one ambitiously funded agency.

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The combined budgets of the three units is currently less than \$80 million annually.

Ban said much more needed to be done in the fight for women's rights, particularly in combating violence against women and girls around the world, which is the theme for this year's International Women's Day.

"Most societies proscribe such violence -- yet the reality is that too often, it is tolerated under the fallacious cover of cultural practices and norms, within the walls of the home," Ban told a U.N. International Women's Day event in New York.

"Or it is used as a weapon in armed conflict, condoned through tacit silence and passivity by the state and the law enforcement community," said Ban, a former South Korean foreign minister who became secretary-general on January 1.

Ban also suggested that the U.N. General Assembly discuss the problem of violence against women and girls once a year and that the Security Council establish a formal monitoring of violence against women and girls.

Sheikha Haya Rashed al Khalifa, the president of the General Assembly, said the burden is "on our shoulders to guarantee peace and security for all women" and that urgent action is needed.

"We must demonstrate once and for all that there are no grounds for tolerance and no tolerable excuses," she said.

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