

## Tackling impunity and discrimination among top priorities for UN rights chief



UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Navi Pillay

15 September 2009 – Discrimination remains a “scourge” that affects every country, the United Nations human rights chief said today, adding that combating it has become one of her office’s top priorities, along with tackling impunity for various rights violations.

“Eliminating discrimination is a duty of the highest order,” Navi Pillay, the High Commissioner for Human Rights, said in her **opening address** to the 12th session of the UN Human Rights Council.

She said there were “huge gaps” between the “lofty pledges” made by States and the realities of daily life for many of their inhabitants, pointing out that “no country in the world can claim to be free of human rights violations.”

Ms. Pillay, who has just completed her first year as the world body’s top rights official, gave a wide-ranging speech to the Geneva-based body in which she named 47 different countries and territories in connection with themes ranging from the effect of the recession on the world’s poorest people to the brutal suppression of criticism to the toll of conflict on fundamental rights.

Highlighting her point that no country is immune from discrimination, she listed 17 European countries where violence or discrimination against Roma has been recorded, ranging from fatal attacks and police brutality to forced evictions and systemic discrimination.

In Latin America, she noted positive developments with regard to the approach taken by some States to indigenous peoples, but added that “land grabs, the suppression of traditional customs, outright violence and deadly attacks continue to take place.”

Turning to China, she urged the authorities there to respect human rights in their efforts to uphold the law, and to “reflect on the underlying causes” of incidents such as the recent disturbances in the Xinjiang and Tibetan Autonomous Regions which include discrimination and the failure to protect minority rights.

Ms. Pillay also highlighted the fact that the human rights of women continue to be denied or curtailed in many countries. While noting some improvements in the Gulf region, she stated that the overall situation of women there “falls well short of international standards.”

The High Commissioner issued a strong call to governments to combat impunity for crimes committed during armed conflicts, and in particular those directed against civilians.

"I urge the international community, including this Council, to insist on full accountability for all violations and to ensure assistance to the victims," she **said**. "I also urge all those States contributing to military operations, whether it be in their own country or in other countries, to enhance their efforts to prevent civilian casualties, which in Afghanistan and elsewhere remain at unacceptably high levels."

She noted that an "intolerable" number of displaced people continue to live in camps, adding that in the case of Sri Lanka "internally displaced persons are effectively detained under conditions of internment."

Another area requiring action by States is addressing the "alarming global trend" of governments, or other powerful forces, persecuting or even killing peaceful opponents and critics, she stated.

"In too many countries, brave human rights advocates, journalists and dissidents face abduction, arbitrary detention, torture and even death to defend their rights and freedoms and those of the communities they serve or represent," said Ms. Pillay.

In particular, she cited "the unfair and arbitrary detention" of Aung Sang Suu Kyi and more than 2,000 other political prisoners, which she said "makes a mockery of Myanmar's commitment to democratic transition."

She also noted the 20-year prison sentence imposed on Sri Lankan journalist J.S. Tissainayagam, who had criticized the army's treatment of Tamil civilians, and the detention and ill-treatment of a prominent human rights defender in Zimbabwe, as well as the recent murders of human rights defenders in Mexico and Russia.

She also called on the Government of Iran to release those detained for peaceful protest in the wake of the recent elections, and to investigate reports of their ill-treatment.

In addition, Ms. Pillay said that "democratic deficits" remain a significant obstacle to the protection of human rights and respect for the rule of law, noting that "constitutional order has been subverted" in places like Honduras and Fiji.

In a related development, the 47-member Human Rights Council today decided not to let Honduras' Geneva-based ambassador attend its proceedings, after determining he represents the post-coup government that few countries recognize as legitimate.

The action came after other Latin American States said the ambassador represented an "illegal" regime and not the administration of President Manuel Zelaya, who was ousted by the military in June.

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