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## 'Encouraging' changes under way in Persian Gulf countries, says UN rights chief



UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Navanethem Pillay

19 April 2010 – A top United Nations official today pointed to “encouraging” efforts to improve human rights by the six nations that make up the Gulf Cooperation Council, while also noting ongoing concerns in areas such as women’s rights and freedom of expression, association and assembly.

High Commissioner for Human Rights Navi Pillay highlighted economic and social rights, children’s rights and human trafficking as areas where progress has been made, in a [keynote speech](#) at the King Abdullah University for Science and Technology in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, the first stop on a six-nation mission.

Ms. Pillay noted in her address to students and faculty at the new coeducational university that education, including higher studies, is now available to more and more women in the region. “Investing in education, including education for women, is not only fair, but it is also smart policy.”

Progress has also been achieved in other areas, she said, noting that “some Members States of the Organization of the Islamic Conference have modified their laws with respect to women’s rights, including marriage, divorce and public participation.”

While lauding the fact that women now have the right to vote and have access to public office in several Gulf Cooperation Council countries, the High Commissioner

pointed out that women are still not able to fully enjoy their human rights all across the region.

"Discriminatory barriers continue to hamper women's right to shape their own lives and choices, and fully participate in public life," she said. "...These barriers must be removed. It is also time to put to rest the concept of male guardianship... Positive developments for women's civil and political rights are still patchy and uneven in the region."

The High Commissioner said she was encouraged to see that more States in the region have adopted, or are enacting, laws to combat human trafficking. At the same time, she voiced concern about the treatment of migrant workers which she said reflected problems facing migrants elsewhere in the world.

Reports "consistently cite ongoing practices of unlawful confiscation of passports, withholding of wages and exploitation by unscrupulous recruitment agencies and employers," she said. "The situation of migrant domestic workers is of particular concern..." She drew attention to their often inadequate living and working conditions and to the fact that they are sometimes "unable to obtain access to judicial recourse and effective remedies for their plight."

She urged those States that had not yet replaced the sponsorship system known as Kafala – that "rigidly binds migrants to their employers, enabling the latter to commit abuses, while preventing workers from changing jobs or leaving the country" – with updated labour laws to do so at the earliest.

In her wide-ranging address, Ms. Pillay also discussed the issue of stateless persons, including the Bidoon, who number in the hundreds of thousands across the region, and called on all States to ratify the two statelessness Conventions, in addition to the Convention on migrant workers.

She also stressed the importance of a "vibrant press and committed civil society" able to operate freely and alert the State to issues and problems as they arise. In many countries "a worrisome trend is emerging or re-emerging," she added, referring to laws that aim at curtailing civil society's scope of action, and restrictions on some media organizations.

In addition, the High Commissioner pointed to the "growing effectiveness" of the national human rights institutions in Qatar and Saudi Arabia, which were the first to be created in the Gulf region, congratulated Bahrain and Oman for their recent establishment of national human rights institutions, and called on the remaining countries to follow suit.

Ms. Pillay's 10-day mission will also take her to Qatar, Kuwait, Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates and Oman.

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