

Haitian recovery must include strengthening of human rights – top UN official

27 January 2010 –Not only must Haiti's infrastructure be built back better in the wake of the devastating earthquake, but its human rights mechanisms must also be enhanced, the top United Nations rights official said today.

"Our paramount goal must be ensuring that all Haitian people attain their dignity and rights in full," she [told](#) a special session of the Human Rights Council on the aftermath of the 12 January earthquake.

"The pursuit of this objective cannot be postponed until more favourable conditions prevail. It must be made part and parcel of our action right now."

The Haitian Government has confirmed that 150,000 people have perished, with thousands more still buried under the rubble. An even larger number have been made homeless by the 7.0-magnitude quake, which devastated the capital, Port-au-Prince.

The effects of the quake "were further exacerbated by pre-existing inhuman conditions of poverty, instability and feeble institutions," the High Commissioner said, pointing to practices including the forced movement from rural to urban areas to provide cheap labour for Haiti's elite under the Duvalier regime between 1957 and 1986.

"The congestion of urban centres has ever since been a cause of abuse and heightened vulnerability to natural disaster and to conflict over scarce jobs and resources," she noted. "At the same time, living conditions in rural areas remained and continue to be culpably neglected."

The aid effort is well under way in Haiti, already the Western Hemisphere's poorest country before the disaster.

"To sustain effective development policies, bolster good governance and ameliorate the delivery of, and access to, services including health and education, we must anchor our initiatives in human rights," Ms. Pillay stressed.

A human rights approach to the recovery process will help tackle the root causes of vulnerabilities, such as poverty and discrimination, she added.

Protecting the vulnerable – especially the disabled, the elderly, women and children – who are more likely to face dispossession, arbitrary arrest, violence and trafficking is essential, the High Commissioner stressed.

She also voiced concerns over reports of summary executions of prisoners who escaped from Haiti's jails following the earthquake by angry mobs. "The rule of law must be quickly re-established in the capital and elsewhere."

The Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), along with the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), has dispatched a five-person team to Haiti to lead and help coordinate protection efforts in partnership with the Government. The mission will assess the immediate rights needs of the population.

Ms. Pillay called for rebuilding Haiti's national human rights protection systems through an effective and independent judiciary as well as a law enforcement system that respects human rights.

Yesterday, top UN humanitarian officials underscored that Haitians must have leadership of the post-earthquake recovery process, as aid agencies are making important progress in reaching people affected by the disaster.

Significant steps forward are being made in the areas of water and food distribution, among others, Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs John Holmes told reporters in New York.

But he added that "we are conscious it's a very long way to go to get to all the people in need with basic items."

The World Food Programme (WFP) said that it has reached almost 450,000 people with nearly 10 million meals since the 12 January earthquake, with more food set to arrive.

The \$575 million UN flash appeal for Haiti launched on 15 January, three days after the quake, is only 49 per cent funded, Mr. Holmes said, expressing concern that certain crucial sectors – including early recovery – remain underfunded.