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Haiti: UN human rights chief urges greater attention to fundamental rights



High Commissioner for Human Rights Navi Pillay

11 January 2011 – The top United Nations human rights official today expressed solidarity with the people of Haiti on the eve of the first anniversary of the catastrophic earthquake that killed hundreds of thousands of people and called for concerted efforts to improve fundamental human rights in the country.

Navi Pillay, the High Commissioner for Human Rights, acknowledged the significant efforts, despite heavy losses of personnel, by the Haitian Government and the international community to address the tremendous challenges facing the country.

She expressed deep concern that, although there have been advances in many areas, the situation in the Caribbean country remains critical, and highlighted some key human rights issues she believes need urgent attention by the authorities.

“Firstly, a comprehensive long-term plan needs to be put in place by the Haitian Government, with the support of the international community, so that the State can provide durable solutions regarding access to basic services, both for those living in camps and those living in slums, in line with its human rights responsibilities,” Ms. Pillay said.

As of 1 January, there are an estimated 810,000 people still living in the 1,150 camps that still exist in the country, UN Humanitarian Coordinator Nigel Fisher stated yesterday. That is just over half of the camp population which reached its peak of 1.5 million in July last year.

“Current access to adequate shelter, water, sanitation, education and health care continues to fall far below acceptable levels,” said Ms. Pillay, adding that “without an overarching guiding plan, the many national and international temporary housing and reconstruction initiatives in place will be inadequately coordinated, and people will continue to be evicted from camps without adequate alternative solutions.”

She called for efforts to strengthen the functioning of rule of law institutions, particularly ensuring that tribunals, prisons and the police comply with international human rights standards and that the population has greater access to security and justice.

The High Commissioner also hoped that a solution could soon be found to the ongoing political crisis that would reflect the aspirations of Haitian voters and provide a more conducive environment for reconstruction. She urged the presidential candidates to call on their supporters to avoid violence.

She also urged the Haitian authorities to strive to prevent the lynching of individuals accused of spreading cholera, and to ensure that those who carried out such attacks are brought to justice. It is also vital to strengthen the cholera awareness campaign so that people know about the disease and how it is transmitted to reduce the mortality rates, she said. The outbreak, which began in October, has already claimed at least 3,600 lives.

In addition, she stressed the need for the international community to make available the funds pledged to assist Haiti.

“We all have a role and a responsibility to ensure that, in 2011, the utmost is done to move the country forward, not just in terms of physical reconstruction, but also in terms of ensuring that the inhabitants’ fundamental rights are dramatically improved,” Ms. Pillay said.

The earthquake that struck Haiti on 12 January last year killed 222,000 people, including 102 UN staff, left 1.5 million people homeless and devastated the country’s infrastructure.

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