



UN marks Human Rights Day with call to end all forms of discrimination



Human Rights Day, 10 December 2009

10 December 2009 – The United Nations marked Human Rights Day today, the 61st anniversary of the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, by stressing the enduring need to eliminate all forms of discrimination, with officials in the world’s most crisis-plagued regions – from Iraq to Afghanistan to Somalia – appealing for tolerance in the interests of peace.

“No country is free of discrimination,” Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon said in a **message** for the Day whose theme this year is ‘Embrace Diversity, End Discrimination.’ “It may appear as institutionalized racism, as ethnic strife, as episodes of intolerance and rejection, or as an official national version of history that denies the identity of others.

“Discrimination targets individuals and groups that are vulnerable to attack: the disabled, women and girls, the poor, migrants, minorities, and all those who are perceived as different,” he added, pledging UN commitment to fight inequality and intolerance wherever they are found.

In Baghdad, Mr. Ban’s Special Representative Ad Melkert called on all Iraqis to respect each others’ political rights, as well as cultural, religious, ethnic and gender differences, singling out the status of women. “Violence against women cannot be seen in isolation from discrimination against them,” he said.

In Kabul, too, the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (**UNAMA**) stressed that eight years after the end of Taliban rule, women still face growing challenges in public life and have limited access to justice. “Life in public spaces for Afghan women is shrinking and gender-

based violence is still widespread and deeply rooted in Afghan society," UNAMA human rights chief Norah Niland said.

Mr. Ban's Special Representative for Somalia Ahmedou Ould-Abdallah praised the courage of those who continued to risk their lives to protect and defend the human rights in a faction-riven country that has known no peace for nearly two decades. "A whole generation is growing up having never known what it means to live in a peaceful, stable environment where rights are respected," he said.

In New York, General Assembly President Ali Treki joined the chorus of those calling for the respect of human rights without distinction to race, sex, language or religion. "Millions of human beings continue to fight a daily battle against discrimination to gain access to education, health services and decent work," he said. "The realization of all human rights, social, economic and cultural rights, as well as civil and political rights, is hampered by discrimination."

And in Geneva, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Navi Pillay deplored the fact that discrimination is still rampant 61 years after the Declaration's adoption. "Women work two-thirds of the world's working hours and produce half of the world's food, yet earn only 10 per cent of the world's income and own less than one per cent of the world's property," she said, also citing discrimination plaguing ethnic, racial and religious minorities, refugees and migrants.

In a joint statement the various independent experts who report to the Geneva-based UN Human Rights Council warned that efforts to end discrimination are falling short and progress is even being reversed in some instances. "Globally, stronger commitments and more determined action are required if we are to defeat discrimination," they said. "Our ethnic, cultural or religious differences should be acknowledged, valued and respected, not seen as a threat to our unity as they too often are, but as a celebrated component of it."

At UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (**UNESCO**) headquarters in Paris, Director-General Irina Bokova said this year's theme is particularly pertinent since the world has become more diverse than ever before. "It is only through mutual respect, understanding, constructive dialogue and acceptance of the right to be different that we will defuse tensions and build more peaceful multicultural societies," she stressed.

Celebrations marking the Day spanned the globe, with the parliament of Timor-Leste – the tiny South-East Asian nation that the UN shepherded to independence in 2002 after its vote to separate from Indonesia – holding a special commemorative session at which Mr. Ban's Special Representative Atul Khare highlighted the importance of the role of the Government and civil society in ending violence against women.

A half a world away in Washington UN Population Fund (**UNFPA**) Executive Director Thoraya Obaid was awarded the UN Association for the National Capital Area (**UNA-NCA**) Louis B. Sohn Human Rights Award for her deep commitment to the belief that women's rights are human rights.

"What makes it [the award] more significant for me is that I am receiving it on Human Rights Day," she said. "Such an honour will only make me, and UNFPA, more committed to promoting the human rights of women and girls who still face gender discrimination and violence, to advancing their empowerment and gender equality and to ensuring universal access to reproductive health."

Meanwhile back at UN Headquarters in New York a special Human Rights Day event, entitled 'Race, Poverty and Power,' was being held, as well as a panel discussion on opposing rights violations on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity. And in Geneva, women from 28 countries convened for a UN-backed symposium entitled *The Courage to Lead: A Human Rights Summit for Women Leaders*.

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