UNITED NATIONS

Press Release

UN EXPERTS MARK INTERNATIONAL HUMAN RIGHTS DAY WITH CALL FOR STATES TO INTENSIFY EFFORTS TO COMBAT DISCRIMINATION AND EXCLUSION

7 December 2007

The following statement was issued today by United Nations special procedures mandate holders:

On this International Human Rights Day, 10 December 2007, we the Special Procedures mandate holders of the United Nations Human Rights Council highlight the need to intensify efforts to combat discrimination and exclusion, which continue to impair the rights, dignity and access to justice of millions of individuals and innumerable communities worldwide. Discrimination infects societies in every region of the world and is a root cause of many human rights violations. In civil and political as well as economic, social and cultural spheres, the extraordinary impact of discrimination on human rights forms a common thread between our mandates.

Discrimination may be deeply and historically entrenched or, as our societies have changed and evolved, it may emerge in new yet equally abhorrent forms. Discrimination continues to distort the economic, social and political contours of societies. Individuals and communities face discrimination and exclusion on the basis of their race, ethnicity, religion, language, sex or sexual orientation amongst many other grounds. Discrimination based on gender continues to be a concern in every country of the world. Discrimination may deny certain individuals or groups a political voice or representation, which in turn hinders their ability to influence decisions that impact destructively upon their daily lives. Discrimination can also lead to segregation, ghettoization and persistent poverty. Commonly these individuals and groups face obstacles and discriminatory practices which deny them access to justice.

Left unchallenged, the damaging effects of discrimination and exclusion are cumulative, and affect in particular those already made vulnerable by inequality of treatment. They can begin to create fault lines within society between those who have their full rights, justice and dignity respected, and those who do not. The connection between long-term discrimination and exclusion to tensions, instability and conflict is now well established, but must be more widely understood. In this understanding lies the possibility of more effective prevention measures that promote inclusion and stability and

address the root causes of conflict at a much earlier stage.

The year ahead also marks the 60th anniversary of the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights and it is fitting to recall that Articles 1 and 2 of the Declaration establish that all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights, and that everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms in the Declaration without distinction of any kind. The principles of equality and non-discrimination are also guaranteed in the core human rights treaties which form the basis of international human rights law. Equality and non-discrimination are fundamental rights in themselves, yet they are often neglected as such.

Comprehensive anti-discrimination legislation brings greater clarity and understanding of the issues and sends a strong message that racism and discrimination will not be tolerated. Yet too often, such clear legislation is absent or not matched by effective implementation and access to justice for victims of discrimination. Recognition at the highest level that discrimination exists and the political will to confront it are vital first steps towards its elimination. States, with civil society partners, must take the lead in promoting non-discrimination and equality in wider society, and be proactive in efforts to encourage social cohesion and inclusion, including through education and the media.

It is necessary to constantly measure and monitor the reality of our societies to guard against discrimination including its new manifestations such as discriminatory "profiling" in the context of counter-terrorism measures. We must be vigilant in identifying problems stemming from discrimination in order to craft appropriate responses, and ensure that institutions, including political structures, the police, and the judiciary better reflect the diversity and multiculturalism, which are increasingly a feature of all societies in all regions. The fight against discrimination is more than a passive obligation, in many cases it also requires positive steps to redress historic and enduring inequalities.

In 2001 the World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance took place in Durban, South Africa. This year work has begun towards convening in 2009 a review conference on the implementation of the Durban Declaration and Programme of Action, which offers a crucial opportunity to assess the progress achieved and the challenges remaining towards the elimination of racial discrimination. We reiterate our commitment to work with States to eliminate discrimination and exclusion on all grounds, in an effort to prevent human rights abuses and conflict, to redress ongoing and past violations, and to design appropriate legislative and policy responses. We celebrate the Universal Declaration of Human Rights as a fundamental text for the protection and promotion of all human rights for all, and call on States to ensure its full implementation.