

HIGH COMMISSIONER FOR HUMAN RIGHTS – SPEECH ON THE OCCASION OF  
THE OPENING OF THE NETHERLANDS INSTITUTE FOR HUMAN RIGHTS,  
2.10.2012

Your Majesty,

Distinguished Chair and

Members of the Netherlands Institute for Human Rights,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is both my pleasure and honour to be here today at the opening ceremony of the Netherlands Institute for Human Rights. I am particularly pleased to be in Utrecht, the first Dutch ‘human rights’ city, which is also well known for its University’s Institute of Human Rights (SIM). I am very grateful to the Netherlands, which has consistently provided strong support to my Office, enabling it to perform its important mission worldwide to advance the promotion and protection of human rights for all.

In the past months, my Office has closely followed the changes in the Middle East and North Africa; changes sparked by the aspiration of ordinary people for a life of dignity. While the process of developing democratic societies and a culture of human rights will take time, one of the key lessons learned from the Arab Spring has been that economic indicators alone fail to provide the real picture of a country situation. Development cooperation efforts cannot be successful or sustainable without ensuring that they are built on solid foundations that respect human rights, good governance and the rule of law.

Strengthening human rights protection systems at the country level is a vital function of my Office. This is increasingly undertaken in partnership with development actors, including the UN system, regional and national organisations, as well as international financial institutions. A key element of that protection system is the existence of independent and effective national human rights institutions (NHRIs) to oversee the implementation of international, regional and national human rights norms. To do this effectively, NHRIs must be independent.

My Office supports the mechanism for the accreditation of NHRIs by the International Coordinating Committee, which assesses conformity with the relevant international standards, the so-called Paris Principles, contained in UN General Assembly resolution 48/134. My Office also works closely with NHRIs in all parts of the world, as

well as their regional coordinating bodies. I am pleased to recognize among you Mr. Alan Miller, the Chair of the Scottish NHRI who leads the European Group of NHRIs.

The establishment of the Netherlands Institute for Human Rights is the outcome of a process conducted by the Government with the participation of civil society, parliament and the previous human rights institution – the Equal Treatment Commission. It demonstrates this country's commitment towards the promotion and protection of human rights for all. I would like to commend the positive role played by the Equal Treatment Commission, and the work it did to shape and establish the Institute for Human Rights, with the aim of ensuring full compliance with the Paris Principles.

Your Majesty, Ladies and Gentlemen,

As actors for positive change, independent and effective NHRIs are well-placed to address, but also to prevent, human rights violations. They have an important role to play even in societies with a long tradition of democracy and the rule of law; a role that is particularly relevant today in light of the global economic and financial crises and the resulting austerity measures introduced by governments. NHRIs are increasingly active in protecting marginalized individuals and groups by ensuring that principles of non-discrimination and equality are incorporated into legislation, policies and practice.

My office is actively engaged in improving coordination within the United Nations system to assist NHRIs, and strongly supports their increased interaction with regional human rights mechanisms, including in this context, the Council of Europe, the European Court of Human Rights, the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA), and the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights of the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe. We encourage the sharing of good practices among NHRIs, support the strengthening of their regional networks, and facilitate their access to relevant partners on the ground.

Independent and effective NHRIs are key partners to the United Nations human rights mechanisms. They provide information, engage in interactive dialogues, and support follow up action on recommendations emanating from human rights treaty bodies, the Human Rights Council special procedures and the Universal Periodic Review.

Like treaty bodies, NHRIs enjoy an independent status, and are therefore unique actors to enhance implementation by States of their treaty obligations under international human rights law. NHRIs assist civil society in their cooperation with human rights

mechanisms and provide independent guidance to States to comply with their treaty obligations. In this regard, I am grateful for the on-going support of the Netherlands to the process I launched in 2009 to strengthen the treaty body system, and that is now in the hands of both the United Nations General Assembly and the treaty bodies.

Drawing upon the experiences of the Equal Treatment Commission and other national institutions, the National Institute for Human Rights can perform a vital role in advising and assisting the Government in effectively addressing human rights issues in the Netherlands in compliance with its international obligations, and provide information to rights holders on access to justice and effective remedies. During the Universal Periodic Review of the Netherlands, which had its plenary session in Geneva last week, the Working Group raised a number of issues where further attention is needed by the State. Examples of these are: policies and programmes to combat all of forms of discrimination, racism and xenophobia, including those based on religion; efforts to advance the rights of immigrants and asylum seekers in the country, including in the area of justice and detention; and measures to eliminate violence against women and domestic violence.

During the recent UPR, recommendations were also made to ensure the effectiveness and independence of the Netherlands Institute for Human Rights, and to expedite its full establishment, reinforcing some of the earlier recommendations by treaty bodies.

My Office provided assistance and legal advice throughout the transformation of the Equal Treatment Commission into the Netherlands Institute for Human Rights. I would like to renew OHCHR's continuous commitment, including through the Brussels-based Regional Office for Europe, to support the Netherlands Institute for Human Rights in its aim of fully complying with the Paris Principles, and in becoming an independent and effective national human rights institution playing a critical role at the national, regional and international level.

I wish the Netherlands Institute for Human Rights much success in its future endeavours and the work it will be undertaking to promote and protect human rights for all who live in the Netherlands.

I thank you for your attention.

