

“Discrimination lies at the root of many of the world's most pressing human rights problems. No country is immune from this scourge. Eliminating discrimination is a duty of the highest order.”

Navi Pillay, United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights

An end to discrimination

Human Rights Day 2009 on 10 December focuses on ending discrimination. **“All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights”**. These first few famous words of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights established 60 years ago the basic premise of international human rights law. Yet today, the fight against discrimination remains a daily struggle for millions around the globe.

The realisation of all human rights - social, economic and cultural rights as well as civil and political rights - is hampered by discrimination. All too often, when faced with prejudice and discrimination, political leaders, governments and ordinary citizens are silent or complacent.

“Our main objective is to help promote discrimination-free societies and a world of equal treatment for all,” says UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Navi Pillay who this year marks Human Rights Day in South Africa.

PRINCIPLES OF EQUALITY AND NON-DISCRIMINATION

The United Nations has since its very beginning set as one of its goals “to reaffirm faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person”¹ without distinction as to race, sex, language, or religion. Discrimination undermines that goal and its eradication has proven to be very difficult, as this phenomenon is more subtle, more corrosive and more resilient than anyone had thought.

Discrimination is multi-layered. Groups who are discriminated against on the basis of their racial origins for example, then encounter further discrimination because they cannot access education, health and cultural facilities. Persons with disabilities make up the world's largest and most disadvantaged minority, for example, 98 percent of children with disabilities in developing countries do not attend school.² Indigenous peoples represent 5 percent of the world's population, but 15 percent of the world's



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Poverty is a cause and a multiplier of discrimination. In Rio Suchio, Colombia, every year the people there must endure flooding that swamps their houses and roads.

¹ Preamble Universal Declaration of Human Rights

² UN handbook, From Exclusion to Equality, Realizing the Rights of Persons with Disabilities

poorest people.³ Women account for two-thirds of the world's working hours and produce half of the world's food yet they earn only 10 percent of the world's income and own less than 1 percent of the world's property.⁴

Despite the challenges and setbacks, there has been and continues to be a rejection of discrimination. There have been enough successes to demonstrate that this scourge can be eradicated.

The UN Human Rights office is a world leader in the stand against the forces of discrimination. As the guardian of international human rights law, the Office of the High Commissioner advocates and promotes human rights reforms in many countries world-wide and throughout the UN community.

HUMAN RIGHTS DAY

Human Rights Day is observed by the international community every year on 10 December. It commemorates the day in 1948 when the United Nations General Assembly adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The Office of the High Commissioner plays a major role in coordinating efforts for the yearly observance of Human Rights Day.

The theme for Human Rights Day 2009 is the fundamental importance of non-discrimination captured in the slogan "Embrace diversity, End discrimination". The focus on non discrimination will continue throughout 2010.

On 10 December, the UN Human Rights office, the wider UN community and many other organizations at different levels observe Human Rights Day. In her statement to mark this year's Human Rights Day, High Commissioner Navi Pillay observes that it can be difficult for those who are not discriminated against to comprehend the suffering and humiliation that discrimination imposes on others. To that end she is urging people from everywhere, from all walks of life to resolve to "take concrete and lasting actions to help put an end to discrimination."

Pillay will mark Human Rights Day 2009 in South Africa, where she will be awarded an Honorary doctorate from the University of Pretoria.

The High Commissioner will also preside over a panel of high level judges sitting in the first-ever Human Rights Moot Court Competition at the University of

Pretoria. Students from around the world will take part in the competition, organized by the University with the support of the UN Human Rights office. Participants will argue a fictional human rights case on the principle of non-discrimination before the moot court.

At United Nations headquarters in New York, Human Rights Day is the centrepiece of a week of activities. The programme starts on 4 December with a special event being held to celebrate the 30th Anniversary of the major international body of law prohibiting discrimination against women - the Convention for the Elimination of Discrimination against Women. It is followed by the 12th annual student conference on human rights and on 10 December there will be a panel discussion organized by the UN Human Rights office focusing on the different dimensions of discrimination.

In Geneva women from different parts of the world have been invited to participate in a major event over three days which will attempt a generational transfer of knowledge on strategies for overcoming gender discrimination.

CONTACT US

Visit our Human Rights Day webpage (www.ohchr.org) and download audiovisual and print materials, visual designs and more.

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ABOUT THE UN HUMAN RIGHTS OFFICE

The United Nations Human Rights office, part of the UN Secretariat, has been given a unique mandate to promote and protect all human rights. Headquartered in Geneva, the Office is also present in some 50 countries. Headed by the High Commissioner for Human Rights, a position established by the General Assembly in 1993 to spearhead the UN human rights efforts, the Office takes action based on the unique mandate given it by the international community to guard and advocate for international human rights law. For more information please visit www.ohchr.org

³ International Fund for Agricultural Development

⁴ World Bank's World Development Indicators.

