

Check against Delivery



**10th International Conference of NHRIs:
Human Rights and Business: The Role of NHRIs
Edinburgh, Scotland, UK
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STATEMENT

BY

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UNITED NATIONS HIGH COMMISSIONER FOR HUMAN
RIGHTS

Honourable Members of Parliament,

Dear Colleagues,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am very pleased to address the 10th International Conference of National Human Rights Institutions (NHRIs). I wish to thank the Scottish Parliament for hosting this event, the Scottish Human Rights Commission and the International Coordinating Committee of NHRIs for co-organizing this conference together with my Office.

This is a timely opportunity to take stock of the work of NHRIs on human rights and business, the topic at hand. Sharing good practices and discussing how to overcome the challenges associated with this issue will also be central in your discussion.

The interplay of business practices and human rights protection has captured growing attention over the last two decades. Corporate activities and investments are a vital force in development. And development is inextricably linked with human rights and security, including human security. However, business enterprises may also become involved in human rights abuse or obstruct the realization of human rights, both directly and indirectly.

There are several ongoing efforts to better manage the interaction between business and human rights priorities and ensure corporate respect for human rights.

Since 2005, initiatives regarding business and human rights at the international level have been anchored in the work of the Special Representative for business and human rights, Professor John Ruggie. His “Protect, Respect, Remedy” Framework for business and human rights was met with unprecedented support by the Human Rights Council and has contributed greatly to a clarification of the respective roles and responsibilities of States and business with regard to human rights. Based on his work, the Human Rights Council has now affirmed that corporations have a responsibility to respect human rights. I am pleased that the Special Representative is present today to share with us his experience

and ideas, including his proposal to develop Guiding Principles for the implementation of the Framework.

Another important initiative is the UN Global Compact, created in 2000 with the support of OHCHR, which has become the largest global forum aimed at aligning business activities with UN goals, including human rights.

The human rights component of the Compact was strengthened when in June 2006, the Global Compact Board established a Human Rights Working Group. OHCHR is a member of this working group, chaired by Mary Robinson. I would like to welcome Mary to this meeting, and I look forward to her keynote presentation.

Through our active involvement in the Global Compact and in collaboration with other partners, we have contributed to the development of practical tools enabling business to better understand human rights in order to integrate their principles into business management.

My Office also works closely with the International Coordinating Committee of the NHRIs (ICC) to strengthen the capacity of its members to promote and monitor the implementation of international human rights standards at the national level. I wish to highlight some significant initiatives related to our collaboration on today's theme.

For example, in June 2009, during the 11th Session of the Human Rights Council, approximately 30 representatives from NHRIs, nongovernmental organizations and States met at a side event to discuss the emerging role of NHRIs in business and human rights. This event was organized by the ICC in collaboration with OHCHR.

A similar meeting was held at the 14th session of the Human Rights Council in May 2010, co-organized by OHCHR, the ICC and the Government of Norway. On that occasion, I highlighted the important role that NHRIs play at the national level in enhancing access to remedies for victims of corporate human rights abuse and in addressing business-related human rights challenges, including monitoring and handling complaints related to

business practice. Such institutions also can and do play a crucial role in advising on matters of legal reform. For example, in Kenya the NHRI conducted a public inquiry related to allegations of human rights violations arising from the activities of salt companies there. The inquiry investigated the allegations made by representatives from the local community and formulated recommendations to improve the situation. Similarly, the Jordanian NHRI presented its work in relation to promoting labor rights, training of labor inspectors and company owners, as well as its activities in mediating cases related to business and human rights. I am encouraged by the specific initiatives and activities that NHRIs have been undertaking and recommend that these initiatives be documented and compiled as best practices to share among all NHRIs.

In 2008, OHCHR published the results of a survey--conducted in collaboration with the Special Representative--that provided information about the mandate and capacities of NHRIs to manage corporate-related grievances and highlighted significant differences in terms of competence in complaints handling.

This methodology found an echo in the Asia Pacific Forum of National Human Rights Institutions (APF) publication on functions that NHRIs can fill in the context of monitoring and addressing corporate-related human rights abuses. This publication could be a useful tool for work by NHRIs.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

NHRIs represent indispensable conveyor belts between government and all actors in a community. They typically help spot weak links in the national protection system and help devise corrective measures. NHRIs are instrumental in connecting the dots between the various initiatives developed at all levels of societal interaction, including those between human rights advocacy and business practices.

The Declaration which you will adopt in the coming days as the outcome of this conference represents a suitable platform to reiterate your commitment to the preparation

of substantive action plans for your respective institutions. It could also include a roadmap for research and advocacy on the impact of business in the realization of human rights. It may identify ways to enhance the capacity of your NHRI to monitor the protection and promotion of human rights at the national level in relation to the corporate sector. Surely, the path forward would benefit from suggestions about how to facilitate the sharing of best practices through the use of websites and databases. Also highly welcome would be a reflection on how to bolster mediation and conciliation methodologies to resolve disputes among different stakeholders and actors, such as business enterprises, trade unions, governments, and victims of corporate-related human right abuses.

I recommend that NHRIs appoint focal points on human rights and business in order to work with governments and business corporations to ensure that national action plans and programmes include both business and human rights considerations. I welcome the initiative of the ICC to establish a Working Group on business and human rights and look forward to learning more about its activities.

Let me assure you that my Office stands ready to support NHRI initiatives in this area and will work closely with the ICC. I further encourage NHRI interaction with regional and international human rights mechanisms in monitoring States' compliance with their international obligations concerning business and human rights. Broadening partnership with the UN Global Compact, the media, academia, business organizations and trade unions is also an objective to be pursued earnestly.

As co-organizer of this Conference, I would like to extend my appreciation to all the participants for their contributions. In particular, I note the outcome document from the NGO forum as an important element of discussion which could help refine strategies of multi-stakeholders' cooperation

With no further ado, I wish you all a very successful Conference and look forward to the adoption of a substantive Declaration.

Thank you.