

CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

**ADDRESS BY MARY ROBINSON
UNITED NATIONS HIGH COMMISSIONER
FOR HUMAN RIGHTS**



**TO THE INTERNATIONAL CO-ORDINATING
COMMITTEE OF
NATIONAL INSTITUTIONS FOR THE PROMOTION AND
PROTECTION OF HUMAN RIGHTS**

Geneva 17 April 2002

Distinguished members of the International Co-ordinating Committee,
Ladies and gentlemen,

It is a pleasure to be with you again at your Annual Meeting held in parallel to the 58th session of the Commission on Human Rights. I am particularly pleased to welcome here, Mr. Gils Robles, the Council of Europe's Commissioner on Human Rights.

This year's Commission on Human Rights is proving a challenging one in many ways. Some of these challenges will impact directly on your work. Regrettably, we have seen a number of the meetings of the Commission cancelled, due to budgetary constraints, with the broad agenda of the Commission having to be completed in much less time than initially planned. Tomorrow you will take the floor before the Commission for one hour. I share your disappointment that your time has been reduced. However, how the time will be used has been entrusted to your Committee and I am confident that you will encourage an effective use of it – limited though it may be.

Over the past five years I have consistently reaffirmed my commitment to the establishment and strengthening of effective, independent, pluralist and accessible national institutions, established in conformity with the internationally accepted standards - the Paris Principles. I have not wavered, nor have the Special Advisor and the National Institutions Team, from re-enforcing the importance of full compliance with these Principles. I again urge your Committee and those institutions with which you are associated to remain vigilant in this regard. Your credibility and your participation in United Nations fora depend on it.

As I come towards the end of my term as High Commissioner I want to take this opportunity to review with you some of the important, steps I have witnessed regarding national institutions over the past five years.

There has been a definite, marked increase in interest by Member States in establishing national human rights institutions following the adoption of the Paris Principles in 1993. While there is not yet an independent national institution in each State there is one in every corner of the globe - from Mongolia to New Zealand, Denmark to South Africa, Argentina to Canada. These institutions can serve as examples for those States and civil society beginning the process of establishing national institutions. We have drawn on your experience in guiding their establishment and development. Our most recent challenge is in Afghanistan, where we have been active in assisting the establishment of a National Human Rights Commission. We are working in support of a national Working Group, with preliminary assistance from practitioners from the Human Rights Commissions of Sri Lanka and Malaysia.

This sharing of best practices and experiences can be reinforced through the regional mechanisms which I have been pleased to support. Since 1996 we have seen the work, mandate and structure of the Asia Pacific Forum of National Human Rights Institutions strengthen. The planned move of the Forum into a more central location in the heart of the region will contribute to this further strengthening.

The First General Assembly of the Americas Network of National Institutions, in Jamaica, has resulted in a similar structure being established, with the Mexican Human Rights Commission acting as the Network's *ad interim* Secretariat. I was pleased to read, in the statement from the Workshop which dealt with the rights of Indigenous

Peoples, that the promotion and protection of these rights will form a part of the Network's standard programme of work. In the Caribbean, my colleagues have been working with the new sub-regional association of national institutions as they have developed their constitution – which includes a major focus on human rights.

In Africa, the nucleus for an African Secretariat to support the national institutions of this large continent is taking shape. My Office stands ready to support this Secretariat and the activities which it plans to undertake, within the resources we have available.

Within Europe, the Danish Centre for Human Rights has been active in co-ordinating the various efforts throughout the continent. In November, in Ireland and Northern Ireland, I note that you will hold your regional conference with the support of the Council of Europe. This conference will address issues related to asylum seekers, the role of national institutions in post-conflict situations, and international co-operation. I look forward to my Office playing an active role in this important Conference, continuing to strengthen our co-operation, and building on the presence of Mr. Robles here today.

At the international level I applaud your efforts at finding consensus in your work. No better example exists than your joint statement to the World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance. Many of you were involved in the Conference preparations by undertaking practical initiatives and stimulating local awareness of the vast number of issues within the Durban agenda. You contributed constructively to many of the parallel events organised by my Office during the Conference and addressed the plenary in your own right. And you have provided effective follow-up through a number of activities, including the very thorough discussion during your 6th International Conference just completed.

You have expressed considerable interest in strengthening your relationship with the United Nations Treaty Bodies. Support to the Treaty Bodies is a core area of the work of my Office. There has been considerable progress in the attention paid by Treaty Bodies to national institutions. This has been reflected in: consultations by the Treaty Bodies with national institutions in gathering information in relation to the State Party reports – though this can be considerably strengthened; including national institutions in the review process of State Party reports; and in the important follow-up to the Concluding Observations of the Treaty Bodies. A number of Treaty Bodies have supported the efforts of national institutions, as evidenced in the recent General Recommendation of the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination. They have called on States to provide the necessary resources to your institutions, without compromising your independence. They have also called into question Government interference in your work and therefore can be guarantors of your existence when you might come under attack from your Governments – a phenomenon we know is not restricted to any particular geographic region. I therefore applaud your call at your International Conference for a more formal relationship between the Treaty Bodies and National Institutions and assure you that my Office will assist you in this regard.

I encourage you to use all the resources at your disposal to exchange national, regional and international best practices. I was delighted to launch recently your impressive web-site financed by my Office and developed with the assistance of the Danish Centre for Human Rights. This web-site is your window to the world to give

those not aware of your work the chance to become so. It also provides an innovative and cost effective way to exchange experiences among yourselves.

I have always looked to national institutions to help lead the way on a number of important human rights issues. The challenges facing national institutions are many, as they are for those whom you seek to serve. In this context, I have encouraged you from time to time to focus on several specific issues. Last year one particular area was HIV/AIDS and the effects this pandemic is having on every society. This year I have been encouraged to see not only your active response to our request for information for the disability study which we launched just this week, but also your own discussion on disability rights and enhancing the work of national institutions in their promotion and protection. I look forward to vigorous participation by national institutions and NGOs in the process of preparing a new International Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities.

While the work of national institutions is now on a solid footing within my Office, through the efforts of the Special Advisor and a small National Institutions Team, a major issue remains the need for resources to respond to requests from your ever expanding group. I therefore again call upon you to encourage your Governments to provide appropriate support to my Office in this area.

On Monday some of you participated in a panel discussion regarding the 1990 International Convention on the Rights of Migrant Workers and their Families. We remain one signature away from this Convention coming into force. I encourage you, as I have done previously, to push for this signature within your own States.

We have, including through your efforts, seen the 60th ratification of the Statute to establish the International Criminal Court, on 11 April last week. I thank you for your efforts. The Court will come into being on 1 July and will serve as a very important body to address human rights violations which may not be dealt with effectively within national jurisdictions.

Mr. Chairman, let me conclude my final address, as High Commissioner for Human Rights, to the International Co-ordinating Committee of National Institutions by saluting you warmly and emphasising the value of your work. I thank you for your strong expressions of support through the years. It has been a pleasure for me to get to know many of you and see your important work first hand. I wish you all the best in your endeavours and assure you that whatever I may do in the future you will still hear my voice in support of your work.

Thank you.