

Statement by OHCHR, UNICEF, UNIFEM, UNRWA in the OPT on

Human Rights Day - 10 December 2009

On the occasion of this year's Human Rights Day we are embarking on a campaign "**Embrace Diversity – End Discrimination**" for the coming year. The principle of non-discrimination lies at the heart of human rights. Discrimination also lies at the heart of the many human rights violations against Palestinians in the occupied Palestinian territory (oPt).

Twenty-six of the Universal Declaration's 30 Articles begin with the words "Everyone..." or "No one..." Everyone should enjoy all human rights. No one should be excluded. All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. Non-discrimination must prevail. Yet for many Palestinians, those rights such as freedom of movement, right to health or right to work or freedom of religious belief to name only a few continue to be disregarded daily by the reality of the Wall, the Gaza blockade, regime of checkpoints and by-pass roads, permits and obstacles.

Those who do not experience such discrimination may find it hard to comprehend the suffering and humiliation that discrimination imposes on fellow individual human beings. Nor do they always understand the deeply corrosive effect it has on society at large. Walls and artificial societal obstacles feed ignorance and apathy all around. When we however embrace diversity, we bring extra richness and depth to our societies.

We are concerned that in the OPT human rights violations continue to be perpetrated by all duty-bearers (i.e. relevant authorities). They include arbitrary detentions, torture and ill treatment, restrictions of freedom of expression unchecked settlers violence, as well as a broad range of economic, social and cultural rights. We are concerned that human rights defenders - be they in Jerusalem, the rest of West Bank or Gaza, face restrictions and obstacles in their work.

Human rights violations continue with widespread impunity throughout the OPT. We call that all those responsible for such abuses are brought to justice. **Accountability** is key to put an end to violations of rights and freedoms. Without accountability for gross or systematic human rights violations there will also be no justice. Without justice, peace will remain elusive.

Violence against women and girls is among the major issues of concern for the achievement of **gender equality and women's empowerment** worldwide, in the Arab Region as well as in the oPt. This year marks the 30th Anniversary of the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and additionally brings the signature, by the President of the Palestinian Authority (PA) Mahmoud Abbas, to a decree approving the Convention. In the oPt, violence against women still remains a widespread and severe form of discrimination impeding the full enjoyment of women's internationally recognized human rights. The Presidential decree on CEDAW offers Palestinian women and men, girls and boys a

solid tool to advocate for gender justice in all social and economic arenas, as well as in the fight to end violence against women and girls. It brings new accountability for women's rights and gender equality in the oPt and provides the responsibility and the authority to the PA to apply the principles and measures enshrined in the Convention to end gender discrimination and achieve gender equality.

Sixty years ago this week the United Nations General Assembly voted into existence a temporary body known as UNRWA, the United Nations Relief and Works Agency. UNRWA's task was to deal with the humanitarian consequences of the dispossession of some three quarters of a million Palestine refugees forced by the 1948 Middle East war to abandon their homes and flee their ancestral lands. Today, exile remains the lot of Palestinians and Palestine refugees. The occupation of Palestinian land persists, there is no Palestinian state, and the human rights and fundamental freedoms to which Palestinians are entitled under international law do not exist. As forced displacements continue across the West Bank, as Palestinians are evicted from their homes in East Jerusalem, UNRWA brings a simple message: it is time to refocus the debate on the displaced and dispossessed, to put the refugees at the centre of peacemaking efforts. Today UNRWA calls on the international community and the parties to the conflict to acknowledge the 60-year-old injustice as a first step towards addressing the consequences of that injustice. In the words of the Commissioner General of UNRWA, Karen Koning AbuZayd, "Let us build facts in the mind to create facts of a just and durable peace on the ground."

This year also marks two decades since the global community decided that **children** were not just passive recipients of charity, but holders of legally binding rights that are to be ensured by adults. The adoption in 1989 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child transformed the way that children are viewed and treated throughout the world. It called for a revolution that places children at the heart of human development – not only because this offers a strong return on our investment (although it does), nor because the vulnerability of childhood calls on our compassion (although it should), but rather for a more fundamental reason: because it is their right. In oPt, the 20th anniversary of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, reminds us, that we are each individually and collectively accountable, for protecting and promoting the fulfilment of children's rights. Twenty years on, as Chilean poet, educator, diplomat and feminist Gabriela Mistral wrote: "To the child, we cannot answer: 'Tomorrow.' The child's name is Today."

Let us honour Human Rights Day 2009 by embracing diversity and resolving to take concrete and lasting actions to help put an end to discrimination. The time to start doing so is Today, Now.

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