

Check against delivery

**Human Rights Council**

**19<sup>th</sup> Session**



**UNITED NATIONS  
HUMAN RIGHTS  
OFFICE OF THE HIGH COMMISSIONER**

**Opening Statement by**

**Ms. Navi Pillay**

**United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights**

**Geneva, 27 February 2012**

Madam President,  
Distinguished Members of the Human Rights Council,  
Excellencies,  
Colleagues and Friends,

It is almost three-and-half years since I spoke to this Council for the first time. Much of this historic period has been marked by public demands of people to live a life of dignity and enjoyment of human rights. Although most striking in several countries of the Arab region where we have seen tens of thousands of women, men and young people take to the streets to voice their claims, popular movements denouncing exclusion, inequality, discrimination, absence of genuine political participation and lack of economic and social rights have emerged on all continents as people have shown themselves unwilling to accept impunity and lack of accountability for the actions of Governments, international institutions and the transnational and national private sector. People are demanding freedom: freedom from fear, and freedom from want. They are demanding respect of the rule of law – including in the economic sphere – and full participation in decisions that affect their lives.

These recent movements have demonstrated what Heads of State endorsed and committed to at the 2005 Summit – human rights is as important a pillar of UN action as development and peace and

security. Although constrained by resources, my Office has responded to the calls of those claiming the full enjoyment of their human rights through fact-finding missions and needs-assessments, human rights advocacy, good offices activities and technical projects. Demand for our expertise and support has multiplied, and we will continue to do our best to meet them as States make the difficult transition to democracy and the rule of law.

Distinguished members of the Council,

Requests for my participation in activities at country level have increased sevenfold annually since I took up office. As you know, I addressed the General Assembly at the request of its President two weeks ago. I and the Deputy High Commissioner and the Assistant Secretary-General have also briefed the Security Council at their invitation 14 times since 2009.

I am proud to inform you that today OHCHR has 58 human rights field presences on all continents made up of 12 regional presences, 13 country/stand-alone offices, 15 human rights components of peace missions, and 18 human rights advisers in United Nations country teams. These human rights presences are

critical for monitoring and providing targeted technical assistance to Governments and other partners in relation to human rights issues.

The impact of these presences has been profoundly intensified by people who have spread the message of human rights, including through social media, public gatherings or silent opposition. Through their courageous testimonies my Office has been able to react quickly to human rights concerns. Sadly, too many people, including human rights defenders and journalists, have suffered reprisals for expressing their right to freedom of speech and association. We must increase our efforts so that those who seek to expose human rights violations are protected:

Excellencies,

Although there remain sceptics, particularly amongst those who would prefer more rigorous membership criteria, the Council has made significant achievements. Prime amongst these is the universal periodic review, whose first cycle will be completed during this session. Underpinned by the principles of universality, equality and cooperation, UPR is a unique mechanism which has engaged the interest of many, including those at the grass-roots, and has led to positive legislative and policy change. The second cycle, during

which implementation by States of their peers' recommendations will be assessed will test the mechanism's value and credibility. I urge States to be impartial, objective and realistic in assessing the human rights situation and putting forward new recommendations throughout this cycle.

The Council has also proven to be increasingly responsive to violations of human rights on the ground. Between December 2010 and the end of 2011, it convened five special sessions on country situations, and, for the first time, recommended suspension of the membership of one of its members. The Council has also created commissions of inquiry, fact-finding missions and country-specific special procedures to address country situations, and convened thematic panels on important issues and interactive dialogues with me on my reports on several country situations. It has contributed to the development of international law in respect of some pressing themes.

Madam President,

Let me highlight its creation of mechanisms on freedom of assembly and association, coinciding with the many large and popular demonstrations I referred to earlier, and discrimination against women

in law and practice whose stubborn persistence and frequent resurgence requires our full and sustained attention.

The Council has recognized the right to truth, justice and reparations, establishing a special rapporteur on these critical issues. It has made significant progress in encouraging private actors to respect human rights by endorsing the Guiding Principles for Business and Human Rights which constitute a global standard for preventing and addressing adverse human rights results linked to business activity and through convening an intergovernmental working group on the possibility of elaborating an international regulatory framework, including a legally binding instrument on private security companies. Through its work on the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child it has provided an avenue to children to claim their rights. Importantly, the Council has shown itself to be open to discussing all civil, political, economic, social and cultural human rights concerns even those that may be controversial. It requested a study documenting discriminatory laws and practices and acts of violence against individuals based on their sexual orientation and gender identity in all regions of the world and how international human rights law can be used to end violence and related human rights violations in this context.

The fact that over 90 Ministers are here with us this week is a reflection of the importance the international community attaches to the work of the Human Rights Council.

Distinguished Members of the Council,

The Council conducted a successful review of its work and functioning which fine-tuned some of its practices and procedures. Despite this progress, there is much the Council must do to meet its responsibility to ensure that all people in all nations fully enjoy their human rights. It must be even-handed in its approach: it is commendable that it has addressed some situations of serious human rights violations, but there are others which merit its urgent consideration. The Council must improve in following up its recommendations and other actions. Importantly, it has not developed ways to tackle States, including among its members, which fail to cooperate with the Council, its subsidiary mechanisms, other United Nations bodies and my office.

Madam President,

I call on the Council to address these challenges urgently so that it truly lives up to its role of international human rights defender.

This is what the people of the world demand and are expecting from us. This is my objective and with your support, I am convinced that it will be realized.

Thank you.