

REMARKS BY MARY ROBINSON
REGIONAL SEMINAR ON
PROTECTING DIGNITY: AN AGENDA FOR HUMAN RIGHTS

Doha, Qatar, 22 February 2010

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen:

Thank you for the invitation to be with you today. Allow me to express my sincere thanks to HH Sheikha Mozah Nasser al-Misnad for her patronage of today's event. Thank you as well to Dr. Ali bin Semaikh al-Marri, chairman of Qatar's National Human Rights Committee, and to all of your colleagues for making this meeting possible.

I welcome this opportunity to engage in an open dialogue with all of you on human rights. As many of you will know, I was honoured to co-chair during the 60th anniversary year of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 2008, a panel of experts, brought together by an initiative of the Government of Switzerland. Ambassador Rudolf Knoblauch, Special Envoy for Human Rights in the Department of Foreign Affairs of Switzerland, is here today and will be speaking later. My friend Saad Ibrahim, who has helped organize today's meeting, and who you will also hear from today, was a member of the expert panel which included individuals from around the world with long experience of promoting human rights.

Our aim was to advance global dialogue and action on human rights – to, in effect, use the 60th anniversary year of the Universal Declaration to help foster a shared global agenda for human rights for the coming decade.

Our panel's initial report – launched in December 2008 – was an independent effort by a group of experienced human rights experts to set out our thoughts on the human rights issues we believe are not only important in and of themselves but which could be addressed as part of an agenda for joint action by governments and other stakeholders.

Since the launch of the panel's initial report in December 2008 and the subsequent publication of research projects on specific themes identified by the panel, we have sought to find opportunities at

national and regional levels to discuss our initiative. Our intention has been not only to gather comments and recommendations from governments and other stakeholders from every region, but also to encourage further thinking on how key human rights challenges could be most effectively addressed in the years ahead.

As you know, our Panel's report, titled "Protecting Dignity: An Agenda for Human Rights" highlights eight themes we selected as being of particular importance. Following a call for proposals, we selected ten research projects relating to these themes which we hoped would help promote further reflection and dialogue. We're fortunate to have with us today two of the researchers who will present their findings.

Allow me to take a few moments to list and reflect briefly on each of the eight issues the panel identified.

First – the importance of Human Dignity: We believe strongly that the principle of human dignity should be an overarching theme in fostering more constructive human rights dialogue within and between states. The notion of human dignity is a universal concept which in our view has the capacity to transcend cultural, regional and other differences. It can be found in all major religions of the world. As with the Universal Declaration and most core UN human rights treaties, all major regional human rights instruments are based on the concept of human dignity.

Protecting the dignity of all people requires a new spirit of dedication to human flourishing, to valuing equally each individual located within a family, a community, a group, a nation, and a recommitment to the importance of solidarity among all people. I'm pleased that we will be focusing one of our substantive sessions today on this important theme.

Another theme the panel highlighted was Prevention:

The implementation of international human rights obligations depends to a large extent on the effectiveness of national protection systems – the institutional arrangements that function under the national legal order - to ensure that human rights are protected. Our panel concluded that new strategies, and dramatically increased resources, are needed to build effective and accountable institutions, including the police, courts, prisons and national human rights institutions and commissions. Though important work is being done to strengthen institutions of government in all regions, for example in the areas of health and education, far too little emphasis has been placed on ensuring access to a well-functioning justice system.

Our Panel called for the establishment of a new Global Fund to strengthen access to justice and national human rights protection systems. We suggested that there are important lessons to be learned from initiatives in health and other areas, and that the time has come to build on the recognition of the importance of preventive strategies and the need for effective and accountable justice systems in all countries.

A key issue also identified by the Panel involves Detention:

We felt the subject of detention was too often overlooked though it concerns the situation of over 9 million individuals - detainees and prisoners – worldwide. A large proportion of these individuals are kept in inhuman and degrading conditions. Countless individuals are arrested by police officers without sufficient reasons, held in police custody for excessive periods, and often subjected to torture for the purpose of extracting a confession. Many are held for years in pre-trial detention. Our report stressed that more must be done to address the forgotten human rights abuses experienced by people in detention.

We also called for more attention to the issue of Migration:

As population and poverty trends continue to further divide the world between overpopulated, young and poor states on one hand, and wealthy, aging and declining population states on the other, migratory pressures will only intensify. The panel highlighted the urgent need for a more coordinated and principle-based policy framework - building on other efforts such as the Global Commission on International Migration and the International Forum on Migration and Development – which would ensure protection of the rights of migrants and the victims of trafficking.

Statelessness: Another often forgotten human rights challenge concerns the plight of people lacking legally enforceable claims on any state. The injustices of not being able to vote, travel, send children to school, or receive protection from a state are clear. Our Panel report called for greater efforts to understand how this issue can be more effectively addressed and demonstrate through empirical study how citizenship can make a difference to the enjoyment of human rights.

We highlighted the importance of the Right to Health:

Millions of people living in poverty, the majority of which are women, are denied access to adequate housing, food, decent work and basic education, and even the most basic health services. Over a billion have no access to clean water and sanitation. Tackling this enormous problem requires the

implementation of effective policies that are grounded in principles of equity and social justice, policies and programs that recognize the human rights of women as well as men, and which lead to realization of the fundamental right to the highest attainable standard of health for all.

Our panel also put forward recommendations concerning a World Human Rights Court: As some of you may know, the idea for such a court is not new. It was discussed in the 1940s alongside proposals for a High Commissioner for Human Rights and an International Criminal Court. Human rights imply obligations and legal accountability. Our report called for concrete proposals to elaborate how such a Court might ensure greater accountability for human rights in the 21st Century.

Finally – we addressed the links between Climate Change, Development and Human Rights: We know that the most dramatic impacts of climate change already occur in the world's poorest countries, where human rights protections are often weak. More attention to how human rights contribute to assessing future harms, identifying areas of likely vulnerability and evaluating potential policy measures could make a significant impact on ongoing climate change debates which we all agree are now at a critical phase post-Copenhagen.

I'm pleased that we also have the opportunity today to discuss this topic in more depth – and consider its links to poverty and the achievement of the UN Millennium Development Goals by 2015.

As our Panel report notes, we are now well past the halfway mark on the UN Millennium Development Goals timetable. Though progress has been made, it is generally recognized that in some regions and in many target areas the world will fall far short of its collective ambitions. Reaching the MDG targets has become especially difficult with the global economic crisis added to the existing crises of food and climate change. The challenge is to understand where and why we are falling short and what can be done to close the gap between commitments made and results on the ground.

Our report stresses that at least part of the answer lies in strengthening the linkages between states' human rights commitments and their MDG pledges. It is hoped that greater attention to this issue would bear fruit by ensuring that in this September's UN Development Summit the added value of a human rights and justice framework is acknowledged.

We also feel there must be greater attention to expanding decent employment and sustainable livelihood opportunities around the world. This has been the missing link between growth and

poverty reduction strategies of recent decades. We need policies that promote more jobs, and jobs that meet basic labour rights, but also expanded social protection systems that shield people, especially the poor, against economic shocks. Equally important, we need to shape more participatory economic governance through social dialogue between workers, employers, governments and civil society more broadly.

We would welcome your thoughts on steps that could be taken in these areas in the time leading up to the 2010 Summit as well as to begin a discussion on the process of establishing the post-2015 MDG framework – which must address social exclusion, improved participation at the local level, and greater accountability.

The summaries of all the research projects, as well as the panel's December 2008 report are available here and online at www.udhr60.ch.

As you can see, the issues we have highlighted are relevant in every country, in every region around the world. I look forward to hearing your views today on these key challenges, based on your own national experiences as well as from a regional perspective. For purposes of time, we have decided to feature just some of these themes in our formal agenda today, but I want to encourage you all during our open discussions to return to any of the other themes identified by the Panel which you would wish to comment on and discuss further.

That leads me to a final point I wish to stress before concluding my opening remarks. Our panel felt strongly that there continues to be an urgent need for more constructive dialogue between governments, civil society and other actors around how to strengthen national protection systems and ensure greater accountability for human rights at every level over the next decade. That is why we felt the initiative by the Government of Switzerland to bring together a group of independent experts from around the world to put forward ideas that might foster such dialogue was so timely.

I believe we're meeting at an opportune moment to discuss these issues. Not least because earlier this month the Government of Qatar, and a number of other countries from the region, presented reports under the Universal Periodic Review process at the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva as all countries are undertaking as part of the Council's mandate.

The UPR process is itself a potentially important new form of dialogue and accountability at the international level. No country is without human rights challenges. All States have a responsibility to fully respect and implement all human rights and fundamental freedoms. Yet we know the

ongoing challenges involved in fostering constructive and effective dialogue and action, including within the Human Rights Council.

In addition to a range of procedural challenges that still need to be addressed, my understanding of the Council's work thus far still points to an over reliance on regional positions when in fact many of the issues under consideration aren't essentially regional in nature, and when positions may even be quite different within countries and regions. How do we move past such obstacles to more constructive, issues focused dialogue and action that ensures protection of rights for all?

I would hope that part of our discussion today might reflect on the Human Rights Council's first years of existence and how its review in 2011 might best be carried out both in order to support states from all regions in realizing their human rights obligations and in holding them responsible for achieving results.

My hope is that in this decade we see real commitment to making human rights a reality for all, and fill in the gaps in accountability mechanisms to measure our progress. Let us learn to work together, across different cultures, sectors and divisions in approach, to imagine – and work toward – a future where all human beings may, truly, live equally in dignity and rights.

Thank you once again to the Government of Qatar and to the Qatar Human Rights Committee for inviting us all to be here today. I look forward to our discussions.

Thank you.