

Statement to the Press – 31 October 2008

- Thank you all for coming this morning. I am pleased to be here with you today at the end of my first visit to Colombia and my first field mission as High Commissioner of Human Rights.
- Since Monday, I have held meetings with the President, the Minister of Foreign Affairs, the Minister of Defence, the Minister of Interior and Justice, the Minister of Education, as well as many other heads of departments and Government offices entrusted to promote human rights.
- I also met with the Attorney General, the Procurator General, the Supreme and Constitutional Courts, the National Commission for Reparation and Reconciliation and the Ombudsman. A wide variety of civil society representatives, including human rights and women NGOs, victims associations and trade unions, impressed me with their sophistication and commitment to promote and protect human rights in the country.
- On Thursday and Friday, I travelled to Arauca, to learn about the challenges in that region and the work of my Office in the area. I spoke to community leaders, villagers, members of indigenous communities, human rights defenders, trade unions and civilian and military authorities.
- **Government officials pointed out to me the progress made** to promote accountability and respect for human rights within the armed forces and to demobilize Para-military forces. They also raised the increased attention given to the right of victims to truth, justice and reparation. I was impressed by the increased expenditure on government programmes to protect and support vulnerable groups. Such efforts, in a country facing such a complex and multifaceted armed conflict, must be acknowledged and encouraged.

- However, I remain concerned that while Colombia has been keen to implement human rights related policies **several indicators point to persistent and deeply entrenched human rights challenges.**

- I was very pleased that my arrival coincided with the release of a hostage on Sunday, 25 October, who had been held for over 8 years in captivity in the jungle by the FARC. Later, I was deeply moved when meeting the families of police officers and soldiers whose relatives have been kept in the jungle for many years. The mother of a police officer told me how she continues to campaign bravely for the release of her son, a police officer held hostage by the FARC for over 10 years.
 - I would like to reiterate the United Nations unequivocal position that **all hostages must be released immediately and unconditionally.**

 - **Systematic, protracted and widespread taking of hostages, who are kept under the most inhuman conditions, could be considered as a crime against humanity.** We must all ensure that following recent “high level” releases, the plight of all other hostages is not forgotten.

- Both in Bogota and Arauca, I heard heart breaking testimony of many relatives who stated that their loved ones had been arrested and detained often for periods of two years or more on the basis of not always well founded accusations.
 - **Every effort should be made to avoid arbitrary detention and arrest and to ensure that accusations made are well founded.**

- I commend the efforts made by several institutions to guarantee the rights of **internally displaced persons.** At the same time, I am troubled by the high number of old and new displaced persons in many areas of the country as a result of the conflict, of guerrilla activity and of the planting of illegal crops. Displacement places persons under extreme vulnerability.

- **More security measures are required to prevent displacement and to better protect those already displaced.**
- On **extrajudicial executions**, while the efforts made by the Ministry of Defence are highly commendable, it is disturbing that the figures remain as high as they are. I encouraged the Ministry of Defence to continue working to ensure that central orders are enforced at an operational level. The **recent dismissal of Army Officers, including three Generals, for failure to exercise proper control over those under their command facilitating the “disappearance” and extrajudicial execution of several individuals**, is a hopeful indication that such atrocities will not be tolerated and that the Army is moving away from “counting bodies” as a criteria of success in their operations.
 - **I support the commitment expressed by the highest civilian and military authorities of the country that progress in security should be achieved with full adherence to legality and respect for human rights.**
- With regards to the implementation of the **justice and peace law**, after three years of its adoption, it seems to me it could be expedited.
 - Further efforts have to be made to ensure justice for victims. **I urge the Government to continue working to avoid *de facto* amnesties for past and current serious human rights abuses and to ensure that respect for the rights of victims remain at the core of any demobilization policy.**
 - **Reparation for victims needs to include a land restitution programme** for those who lost their land and should benefit equally victims of illegal groups as well as State agents.

- **A good opportunity to further promote the rights of all victims will be the new law on reparations for victims currently debated in the Colombian Congress.**
- **Para-politics** - The Supreme Court and the Attorney General's Office are incredibly brave in investigating and bringing to trial public officials linked to mafias and drug trafficking in the so-called "Para-politics."
 - **We should all support their efforts in such difficult circumstances and continue to uphold the independence of the judiciary – something Colombia is rightly proud of.**
- The **emergence of new illegal armed groups**, many formed from the remnants of the old Para-military organizations, are distressing. These groups continue to victimize and target the civilian population.
- I am also very concerned at the **vulnerability of human rights defenders, trade unionists, journalists and public officials** who continue to be stigmatized and often targeted or threatened for their work.
 - **We should continue working to ensure their protection and public recognition of their work. Their work should be appreciated as an essential component of any vibrant democracy.**
 - **It is with great sadness that I learnt about the assassination, yesterday, of the "Personero" of Segovia. I condemn in the strongest terms this heinous crime. It is imperative that effective protection measures for all public officials responsible for protecting and promoting human rights be implemented. I call upon the Government to energetically investigate this crime, find and sanction those responsible. I would like to express my deepest condolences to his family, friends and colleagues.**

- **Moreover, I would like to encourage the Government and civil society to join forces so that the challenges facing the country can be addressed more effectively.**
- **Women** continue to bear the brunt of the ongoing conflicts in the country. While Government programmes to promote equality in education and opportunities are impressive, it touches me deeply that **women remain the main victims of displacement, violence, inequality and discrimination.** I met with a young victim who is still searching for the father of her two children after three years, despite her displacement and ongoing persecution.
- I would like to mention the plight of the **indigenous peoples**, who have expressed their demands loudly during my visit. I am encouraged that the Government is committed to further dialogue with the indigenous regarding their demands. **Afro-descendants** have informed me of the severe discrimination and racism they face. As you know, I was a victim of institutionalized racism in my own country and take this issue to heart.
 - **I urge the Government to continue in its efforts to promote the rights of these two groups in particular.**
- All my interlocutors, including the Government, pointed to the benefit that my Office has brought to Colombian society.
- The international community should go on assisting Colombia in promoting human rights in this beautiful country.

Thank you.