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Opening Remarks by

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*Human Rights Council Panel Discussion
on the relationship between
climate change and human rights*

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Mr. President,
Distinguished Members of the Human Rights Council,
Excellencies, distinguished panelists,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a pleasure and honour to make opening remarks at this Panel discussion which will address one of the most pressing global challenges we face today. The meeting is most timely. As the United Nations Secretary-General has underlined, 2009 must be “the year of climate change” and high hopes and expectations are pinned on negotiations expected to culminate at the Copenhagen Climate Change Conference in December. As you engage in those negotiations, you must bear in mind the grave human rights consequences of a failure to take decisive action now.

The Human Rights Council has played a key role in drawing attention to the human rights implications of climate change. Last year, in resolution 7/23, the Council expressed concern that “climate change poses an immediate and far-reaching threat to people and communities around the world” and requested the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights to prepare a study on the relationship between climate change and human rights. After considering the study which was produced through wide-ranging consultations, the Council in March this year adopted resolution 10/4, unequivocally recognizing that “climate change-related impacts have a range of implications, both direct and indirect, for the effective enjoyment of human rights”.

Equally, several special procedures of the Human Rights Council have started to consider the implications of climate change-related effects and policies for specific rights in specific contexts.

Excellencies,

The study prepared by the Office highlights the striking “climate injustice” that many of the least developed countries and small island States which have contributed least to global greenhouse gas emissions, will be worst affected by global warming. In addition to geographic vulnerability, these countries are vulnerable due to their low capacity to effectively adapt to climate change. The human rights perspective underlines the need for international cooperation to address the unequal burden falling on those who are least able to carry its weight.

The need to ensure a just and equitable sharing of burden lies at the heart of international climate change negotiations. Notably, the 192 Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change have committed to protect the climate system “on the basis of equity and in accordance with their common but differentiated responsibilities and respective capabilities”, giving full consideration to “the specific needs and special circumstances of developing country Parties”.

As the OHCHR study points out, the human rights framework complements the Climate Change Convention in one important aspect. It brings more clearly into focus the adverse effects of climate change that are felt not only by States and economies, but also – and more fundamentally – by individuals and communities.

Distinguished members of the Council,

As you underlined in resolution 10/4, it is clear that, within countries, those individuals and groups who are already vulnerable and marginalized in society are also particularly exposed to climate change-related threats. For example, women are particularly exposed to climate change-related risks due to gender discrimination and inhibiting gender roles. This is also the case of indigenous peoples who often depend on natural resources for their livelihoods and inhabit fragile ecosystems. Climate change is related not only to environmental factors but also to poverty, discrimination and inequalities– this is why climate change is a human rights issue.

The human rights perspective, focusing on the right of everyone to a dignified life based on the fundamental principles of equality and non-discrimination, is particularly well suited to analyse how climate change affects people differently. Such analysis, which brings into light the underlying causes of vulnerability, is essential to designing effective and sustainable policies and measures to address climate change.

The human rights perspective also underlines the importance of empowerment. Measures to ensure such basic human rights, as access to information, participation in decision-making processes, and access to education, health services and adequate housing, are all important for reducing the vulnerability of individuals to climate change threats.

In sum, as the Council underlined in its resolution 10/4, the human rights dimension can inform and strengthen policy-making in the area of climate change and promoting policy coherence, legitimacy and sustainable outcomes.

Ladies and gentlemen,

A successful outcome of ongoing climate change negotiations matters and matters greatly for human rights. A new climate change agreement must be fair, balanced and sufficiently ambitious to be effective.

At the recently concluded Climate Change Talks in Bonn (1-12 June 2009), States discussed, for the first time, key negotiating texts. It is significant that the text on long-term cooperative action [prepared by the Chair of the Ad Hoc Working Group on Long-term Cooperative Action (AWG-LCA)] includes wording from Human Rights Council resolution 10/4. Paragraph 2, in the preambular part setting out “a shared vision for long-term cooperative action”, highlights that “the adverse effects of climate change will be felt most acutely by those segments of the population who are already in vulnerable situations owing to such factors as geography, poverty, gender, age, indigenous or minority status and disability.” This introduces new important perspectives to

traditionally more State centric climate change debates, and gives the effects experienced by individuals and communities a central place in the new climate change regime. Furthermore, it must be emphasized that the final wording of the Outcome in Copenhagen and its references to the human rights implications of climate change, do not take away from States obligations under international law to do their utmost, through joint and separate action, to protect human rights in the face of climate change or other challenges in good times or in bad times.

Excellencies,

The scientific evidence shows that our action today and over the next decade will be of crucial importance to avert irreversible climate change which could reach catastrophic dimensions and have grave implications for human rights protection. Let the scientific consensus on the seriousness of the threat and the increasing realization of its human rights dimensions be a rallying call for urgent and decisive action to propel the negotiations toward a successful outcome in Copenhagen.

I thank you for your attention.