

OFFICE OF THE HIGH COMMISSIONER FOR HUMAN RIGHTS



Keynote Address by Ms. María Francisca Ize-Charrin

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**Debate on the motion: “This House believes that climate change violates the universal
right of all peoples to live in a safe and sustainable environment”**

Wednesday 17 September 2008, Palais de Nations, Room XXII, 13.00-15.00

-Check against delivery -

Your Excellencies,

Distinguished delegates,

Ladies and gentlemen,

Let me start by expressing my appreciation to H.E. Amb. Abdul Ghafoor Mohamed and the Permanent Mission of the Maldives, with the financial support of the Government of New Zealand, for taking the initiative to organize such a unique and interesting event. I also wish to thank the Oxford University Union Debating Society for contributing their rules of procedure and debating champion to challenge our minds on this most topical issue. I also note with appreciation that this event follows a series of events organized by the Government of the Maldives to move forward our understanding of the human dimension of climate change.

Please allow me, before I deliver my statement, to express my sincere apologies on behalf of Ms. Kang, Deputy High Commissioner for Human Rights, who had indeed confirmed to be with you during this important debate. Regrettably, the Deputy High Commissioner had to travel to New York unexpectedly and hence asked me to represent the Office instead – which I do with great pleasure.

In Bali last year, the Deputy High Commissioner for Human Rights delivered a message on behalf of our former High Commissioner for Human Rights, which continues to shape the thinking of our Office, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights¹. The message is that climate change poses a direct threat to a wide range of universally recognized human rights, such as the rights to life, food, adequate housing or water. These human consequences are already visible and real in many corners of the world. We must give greater attention to such effects of climate change on individuals and communities. The human rights approach compels us to look at the people whose lives are most adversely affected and to urge Governments to integrate their human rights obligations into policies and programmes to deal with the climate change.

¹ At the Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change and its Kyoto Protocol, 3-14 December 2007, Bali, Indonesia.

The issue of climate change has been on the international agenda for decades. However, up until today, debates on climate change have mainly focused on the scientific, environmental and economic aspects and paid scant attention to the human dimensions. Today, we are witnessing a gradual change with increasing attention being given on the social and human impacts of climate change. The Human Rights Council's interest in the matter bears witness to this development, as does today's meetings. Growing documentation and research on how different people and communities are particularly at risk and exposed to the negative effects of global warming are helping us to understand the facts linking climate change and human rights.

A number of factors have contributed to this broadening of the debate – including that the reality of climate change is no longer in dispute. The scientific evidence is clear and unequivocal: not only is climate change real, changes are taking place at a faster pace than most had anticipated and their negative effects are already felt across the globe.

The fourth assessment report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change published last year played an important role in this regard. It documents the range of adverse effects of rising global temperatures and how many of these effects are already being witnessed. For example, climate change is considered a contributing factor for the steep rise in frequency of extreme weather events, such as hurricanes, floods, and heat waves. These and other effects, such as rising sea levels, droughts, increasing water stress, and the spread of tropical and vector born diseases, will only get worse. Importantly, the assessment report points to the fact that irrespective of action taken to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, we are in a situation where these adverse effects cannot be avoided in the short or medium term. Accordingly, a key challenge will be to assist people adapt to new life circumstances.

Looking at the data through a human rights lens, it is evident that climate change threatens the effective enjoyment of a range of human rights. The human rights perspective, focusing on the right of everyone to a dignified life and on the need to combat inequality and discrimination, also brings out how projected climate change-related events affect people differently. It links the assessment of harms and vulnerabilities with an accountability framework based on the obligations assumed by States to respect, protect and fulfil human rights and further accentuate the urgency of global action by drawing attention to the human rights costs of doing nothing. Equally, a human rights analysis is crucial to identify effective

and sustainable developments pathways which adequately address climate change-related vulnerabilities of individuals and groups in society.

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. Equally, the poor and marginalized in society are also the most vulnerable to the adverse effects of climate change. Women who make up the majority of the world's poor and often rely more than men on natural resources for their subsistence, will be particularly affected by impacts of climate change. This is also the case of indigenous peoples who often depend on natural resources for their livelihood and inhabit fragile ecosystems.

Distinguished delegates, Ladies and Gentlemen,

The theme of today's debate underlines how climate change covers a broad range of environmental issues relevant to human rights protection. For example, depletion of natural resources induced by global warming threatens livelihoods and access to adequate nutrition and safe drinking water. The multiple ways the environmental degradation affect human rights underline the close relationship between human rights and the environment.

In her address to the World Summit on Sustainable Development (Johannesburg, 2002), the High Commissioner for Human Rights stressed the importance of deepening our understanding of the links between human rights and environmental protection. She underlined that²:

“The contribution of environmental protection to the realization of basic human rights, and the role of human rights in protection of the environment are undeniable. Substantive rights such as the right to food, health and the right to life itself will not materialize for all of the world's inhabitants unless we maintain a clean and healthy environment with a sustainable base of environmental and natural resources.”

² Quoting the Executive Director of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP).

The deliberations today will no doubt shed further light on the relationship between climate change human rights and the environment. What is evidently clear is that as climate change negatively affects environmental sustainability, human rights suffer.

The way climate change and environmental degradation place human rights under additional strain serves as a sombre reminder that the world is still far from achieving the vision of “justice and dignity” for all set out in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights – at the eve of its 60th anniversary. Even so, internationally agreed human rights norms and standards provide us with a solid basis to address the adverse effects of climate change on human rights promotion and protection. Perhaps most importantly, they provide a strong moral and legal imperative for urgent action, drawing attention to the unacceptable consequence of doing nothing.

I thank you for your attention, and I wish you a successful debate.