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**10th special session of the Human Rights Council: "The Impact of
the Global Economic and Financial Crises on the Universal
Realization and Effective Enjoyment of Human Rights" –**

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Magdalena Sepúlveda Carmona

**UN Independent Expert on the question of human rights
and extreme poverty**

Mr. President, esteemed delegates, ladies and gentlemen,

It is an honor for me to participate in this crucial and historic meeting at which the Human Rights Council, with great insight, has decided to focus on the “the Impact of the Global Economic and Financial Crises on the Universal Realization and Effective Enjoyment of Human Rights”.

This session is an important step towards formally recognizing what common people, in particular men, women and children living in poverty, face every day: the current financial crisis has exasperated the extremely difficult situation of the poor who were already greatly affected by the last year’s unprecedented rise in food and energy prices and it is forcing even more people into a life of poverty. Those people who were already lacking access to basic rights, such as the right to food, housing and health, are now faced with a situation where they are struggling to survive. However, the impact of the financial crisis is not only limited to violations of economic, social and cultural rights, civil and political rights are also under threat.

Evidence indicates that the current crisis is reversing progress achieved in some regions in the reduction of poverty in previous years and it is an obstacle to the accomplishment of the Millennium Development Goals. 125 million people have already been pushed into poverty as a result of the rise in food prices from 2006 to 2008. Conservative estimates indicate that the current global financial crisis will push 60 million more into poverty¹. This is quite frankly an alarming statistic.

Mr. President,

This special session of the Council is dedicated to the impact of the financial crisis on the enjoyment of human rights. In case there is any doubt about the relationship between the current crisis and the enjoyment of human rights, please allow me to briefly shed light on some of the consequences that this crisis will have on the enjoyment of human rights by the poorest.

There is no doubt among experts that this crisis will significantly increase levels of unemployment worldwide. According to predictions from the ILO, the number of unemployed people in 2009 will increase by somewhere between 18 to 50 million people in comparison to 2007.²

Not only will there be more unemployment, but labor conditions are also likely to worsen due to the shortage of opportunities. Although every person is responsible for their own development, the lack of employment and social protection will certainly leave people without the possibility to achieve a decent standard of living for themselves and their families.

Evidence from past crises – none of which were nearly as grave as that which we face - indicates that some groups are more affected than others. Women are disproportionately affected, due to the multiple forms of discrimination that they suffer and due to their limited access to social benefits including medical services and social security. Moreover during periods of crisis women tend to assume a heavier load of unpaid work and to take additional responsibilities to provide non-market substitutes for market goods that their families are no longer able to afford. In order to mitigate any disproportionate affect on women, States must adopt measures to ensure gender equality and make every concerted effort to ensure that women do not suffer disproportionately from the crisis.

¹ E/CN.5/2009/CRP.2 p. 8

² “Globally, an “optimistic” scenario for 2009 would result in an increase of the number of unemployed by 18 million people in comparison with 2007, and this number may well rise to 30 million or more if it takes more time for financial markets to stabilize than is envisaged by decision makers. A rise of 51 million is a possibility should growth slow more rapidly in 2009 and recovery be delayed into 2010.” *ILO, Global Employment Trends, January 2009 p. 24*

In moments of economic recession, those that are the last to enter and the first to exit the labor market – the youth, the elderly and persons with disabilities- are also affected disproportionately. The current crisis will also affect indigenous peoples (historically among the poorest and most excluded groups) disproportionately. Additionally, in times of recession, migrants face particular difficulties caused by a lack of work, increased discrimination and xenophobia and by the fact that their families suffer from a reduction in remittances.

Frustration felt by people as a result of the crisis can also lead to social instability. Evidence indicates that economic hardship increases social tensions and can lead to social and domestic violence. Regrettably, the pictures that we saw of the last year's social mayhem which was a direct result of the food crisis provided us with further confirmation of that link.

States must take all necessary steps, up to the maximum of their available resources, to alleviate the impact of the crisis on the enjoyment and realization of human rights. Given the seriousness of the crisis that we face, it is crucial that States ensure respect for those rights that are essential for the survival of the poor – including the rights to access to social security, water and sanitation, housing and education. States must also guarantee access to work and they must respect labor rights and ensure decent working conditions.

The crisis cannot and must not be used as an excuse to limit the enjoyment and progressive realization of these rights. Indeed, given the potential catastrophic consequences that this crisis will have on the poor there is now more than ever a need to redouble efforts to protect fundamental rights and ensure that the poor are provided with adequate safety nets in the form of social protection schemes and access to medical care where necessary. As it is, those groups in society that are marginalized that will suffer the most from the crisis it is crucial that all States have effective laws and policies in place to combat all forms of discrimination, including racism and xenophobia.

Any unjustified limitations or retrogressive measures on the level of enjoyment of economic, social and cultural rights, for example, the removal or restriction of social protection and welfare would be contrary to internationally recognized human rights obligations.

There is no doubt that the current crisis affects all countries, however, it is without doubt that developing countries will be the most greatly affected. Decreasing levels of exports, restricted access to credit and decreased foreign investment threatens to halt economic growth in many developing countries. This in turn will limit the capacity of developing countries to use money from public budgets to invest in social policies and programs that are necessary to secure the enjoyment of basic economic and social rights and this will have a devastating disproportionate impact on the poorest.

We cannot ignore the fact that for many developing countries, the scope for action is somewhat limited. If the financial crisis also leads to a reduction of already low levels of Official Development Assistance (ODA) to developing countries that are also burdened with the continued payment of foreign debt, a great percentage of people, in particular those living in the least developed countries, will be abandoned in misery and hunger.

The financial crisis requires a coordinated and comprehensive response from the international community and we must integrate into our response not only the financial, commercial, and labor considerations but we must incorporate a human rights approach. The financial crisis must not be used as an excuse to reduce commerce, and even less to break the commitments made by developed states to provide 0.7% of GDP to development aid. Not only must the committed levels of ODA be

maintained, but we must use this opportunity to improve the quality and impact of aid in the targeted communities, and we must increase transparency and reduce the transaction costs associated with aid.

Mr. President,

We are facing a dramatic and unprecedented financial crisis that requires creative solutions. Now more than ever, all States, developed and developing, must redouble efforts to prevent an escalation of poverty and ensure that the three pillars of the Charter of the United Nations: security, development and human rights, are considered fully in the search for solutions. The international community must demonstrate a serious commitment to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Millennium Development Goals and not limit efforts to free all men, women and children, from the abhorrent and inhuman conditions of extreme poverty”.³

Excellencies,

The financial crisis does not only have financial and monetary implications: the negative impact of the crisis in the enjoyment and realization of human rights is evident and it is alarming. In this particularly difficult moment of uncertainty and insecurity, when the number of people living in extreme poverty is rapidly increasing, the international community must take all necessary steps to secure the protection of the poor. It must ensure that those people who have been traditionally excluded and are the most vulnerable have a voice and are heard in the search for solutions. Public policy options must be carefully studied and those that benefit the poorest must be implemented.

In the fight against poverty there is no time to lose. The difference between a day and another without food, without minimal conditions of health, adequate housing and drinkable water is for many people the difference between life and death.

Mr. President,

The crisis we are facing gives to the Human Rights Council and other relevant bodies of the United Nations an opportunity to reaffirm the commitments made with regard to human rights and poverty, as well as an opportunity to search for creative ways of combating poverty bearing in mind human rights obligations.

This session of the Council is important in itself, and it must mark the beginning of concrete action by the international community to alleviate the impact of the crisis on the enjoyment and realization of human rights by the most deprived.

Mr. President, it is time to move from words to action.

Thank you very much.

³ A/Res/55/2 para 11