About OHCHR

The Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights is the leading UN entity on human rights. It has a unique mandate provided by the international community to promote and protect all human rights for all people. The United Nations human rights programme aims to make the protection of human rights a reality in the lives of people everywhere. As the entity in charge of implementing the programme, the Office plays a crucial role in safeguarding the integrity of the three pillars of the United Nations - peace and security, human rights and development.

OHCHR provides assistance, such as technical expertise and capacity development, to support the implementation of international human rights standards on the ground. It also assists entities with a responsibility for the protection of human rights to fulfil their obligations, helps individuals to realize their rights and speaks out objectively on human rights violations.

OHCHR is part of the United Nations Secretariat and has its headquarters in Geneva and an office in New York. OHCHR’s staff is based in nearly 60 countries in regional and country offices, United Nations peace missions or political offices and United Nations Country Teams (UNCTs).

Mandate of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights

General Assembly resolution 48/141 charges the High Commissioner for Human Rights with “principal responsibility” for human rights in the United Nations with the mandate to:

- Promote and protect all human rights for all
- Recommend to bodies of the United Nations system the improved promotion and protection of all human rights
- Promote and protect the right to development
- Provide technical assistance for human rights activities
- Coordinate United Nations human rights education and public information programmes
- Work actively to remove obstacles to the realization of human rights
- Work actively to prevent the continuation of human rights violations
- Engage in dialogue with Governments with the aim of securing respect for all human rights
- Enhance international cooperation
- Coordinate human rights promotion and protection activities throughout the United Nations system
- Rationalize, adapt, strengthen and streamline the UN human rights machinery

Method

The Office’s work encompasses three broad areas: human rights standard-setting, monitoring and supporting implementation. Substantive and technical support is provided to the various UN human rights bodies as they undertake their standard-setting and monitoring duties. Knowledge and awareness of all human rights, whether civil, cultural, economic, political or social rights, are deepened through research and analysis. International human rights experts are also deployed to field offices and other missions, including in circumstances of crisis, to work with countries as they seek to meet their human rights obligations.

The work of the Office is based on the OHCHR Management Plan (OMP), which until the end of the 2010-2011 biennium was named the High Commissioner’s Strategic Management Plan (SMP). The OHCHR Report 2011 presents the results achieved by the Office based on the 2010-2011 SMP and the 11 global expected accomplishments (EAs). Results obtained as progress towards these accomplishments are summarized in the thematic chapters of the report’s printed version and listed under the corresponding field presence or Division in the CD version. The SMP for 2010-2011 also identified eight global management outputs (GMOs) to improve efficiency within the Office. Achievements in this area, along with information on changes in the Office’s management and planning, are explained in the Management chapter on page 112.
Supporting the bodies and mechanisms

The Human Rights Council, comprising representatives of 47 Member States of the United Nations elected by the General Assembly for fixed terms, is given substantive and technical support by the Office in its work, including its regular and special sessions, organizational meetings and meetings of its subsidiary bodies. Stakeholder meetings, special events, discussions and expert panels also are organized and supported by OHCHR.

OHCHR supports the Council’s Universal Periodic Review (UPR). Between its first session in April 2008 and 12th in October 2011, the human rights situation in all 193 Member States of the United Nations was reviewed. The Office organized numerous training events and briefings on this new mechanism around the globe to inform States and other stakeholders of the UPR mechanism and facilitate the preparation of reports. OHCHR also provides substantive and technical support to independent human rights experts known as special procedures mandate-holders, appointed by the Council, in relation to their country visits, reports to the Council and other activities.

The Office provides support to 10 human rights treaty bodies, which are committees of independent experts that consider countries’ progress in implementing the obligations of the international human rights treaties they have ratified. Most of these committees also consider individual complaints of violations of treaty provisions. The results of their deliberations contribute to the body of jurisprudence on international human rights law.

Developing human rights knowledge and awareness

The Office works to ensure the integration of a human rights perspective into development, humanitarian, peace and security, governance and rule of law programmes of the United Nations system. It fosters an approach based on respect for all human rights of individuals and is particularly protective of those who have been or are most at risk of being victims of human rights violations. The work ranges from mapping emerging trends in human rights, addressing problems and documenting good practices, to developing tools and learning packages. Providing support and outreach to multiple stakeholders, including Member States, individuals, civil society and national and regional human rights institutions, are integral parts of the Office’s approach to implementing the High Commissioner’s mandate.

Working in countries

By the end of 2011, OHCHR was operating or supporting 58 field presences, with an additional one planned for 2012. In-country presence is essential to identify, highlight and develop responses to human rights challenges in close collaboration with Governments and the broader United Nations system. Responses can involve training police, soldiers and judges; helping to draft national laws that are in line with international human rights standards; supporting States with their obligation to implement the recommendations of the human rights institutions mechanisms, including the UPR. In many countries and regions, the Office also works with human rights, academic and research institutions and civil society, including charities, advocacy groups and other non-governmental organizations, to strengthen their capacity and effectiveness. Staff are also deployed to rapidly developing humanitarian or other crises and to support fact-finding missions or commissions of inquiry into serious human rights abuses.

Staff

As of 31 December 2011, the Office employed 1,131 staff, of whom 555 (49 per cent) were based in the field, 555 (49 per cent) in Geneva and 21 (2 per cent) in New York. It also supported close to 800 human rights officers serving in 15 UN peace missions or political offices and 18 human rights advisers based in UNCTs in the field.

Structure

In addition to its headquarters in Geneva, the organization has an office at UN Headquarters in New York and, as of 31 December 2011, 12 regional offices or centres and 13 country or stand-alone offices (see map on pages 26-27). The Office also supports the human rights components of UN peace missions or political offices and deploys human rights advisers to work with UNCTs.

The Geneva headquarters has four substantive Divisions: (1) the Research and Right to Development Division, which researches and provides guidance and support on thematic human rights issues; (2) the Human Rights Treaties Division, which supports the treaty bodies; (3) the Field Operations and Technical Cooperation Division, responsible for overseeing and
implementing the Office’s work in the field; and
(4) the Human Rights Council and Special
Procedures Division, which provides substantive and
technical support to the Human Rights Council, the
Council’s UPR mechanism and the Council’s special
procedures. Core management, planning,
coordination and outreach functions are handled by
dedicated Sections which report directly to the
Deputy High Commissioner. For the current
organizational chart, please refer to page 204.

How OHCHR is funded

OHCHR is partially funded from the United Nations
regular budget, which provided 40.9 per cent of the
resources required to implement the Office’s
programme of work in 2011 and partially through
voluntary contributions from donors, the majority of
which are Member States. The amount of regular
budget funding allocated for use by OHCHR has
gradually increased since 2005 when leaders attending
the World Summit committed to doubling the
resources available for the Office over five years.
During the 2010-2011 biennium, an amount of
US$151.6 million was allocated to OHCHR, compared
with US$120.6 million in 2008-2009, US$83.4 million
more information, please refer to page 124.

The level of voluntary funding for OHCHR’s work has
increased substantially over the last decade, almost
tripling from US$41.2 million in 2002 to a peak of
US$119.9 million in 2008. In 2009, the level of
financial support slipped to US$118.1 million before
dropping further to US$109.4 million in 2010 and then
slightly recovering to US$111.1 million in 2011.

The amount of voluntary contributions provided
without earmarking has also grown steadily, rising
from 7 per cent in 2002 to 56 per cent in 2009,
dropping slightly to 54 per cent in 2010 and slipping
further to 51 per cent in 2011. Please refer to pages
124-136 for more information on funding and trends
and challenges, and pages 162-181 for the profiles of
all donors in 2011.
How OHCHR spends its budget

Total expenditure, both under the regular budget and using voluntary, or “extrabudgetary” contributions, rose in 2011 to US$212.3 million (compared to US$193.1 million in 2010). This followed several years of increased spending as the Office sought to implement its plans for an expanded, fully operational human rights programme that is more active at the country level. Excluding expenditures associated with the three grant-making humanitarian funds administered by the Office, 48 per cent of the total expenditure in 2011 was devoted to fieldwork, principally capacity-building projects and human rights monitoring, which was predominantly financed through voluntary contributions. Approximately 12.7 per cent was spent on thematic research and human rights mainstreaming, 11.1 per cent on supporting the human rights treaty bodies and 12.4 per cent on support to the Human Rights Council and its special procedures. The remainder was devoted to programme support (6 per cent) and executive direction and management, resource mobilization and outreach activities (9.8 per cent). Further information on the financial accounts for the year and the breakdown of expenditures and allocation of voluntary contributions can be found at pages 137-153.

History of the UN Human Rights Programme

The UN human rights programme has grown considerably since its modest beginnings some 60 years ago. Organizationally, it started in the 1940s with a small Division in the UN Secretariat in New York. The Division later moved to Geneva and was upgraded to the Centre for Human Rights in the 1980s. At the World Conference on Human Rights in 1993, Member States decided to establish a more robust human rights institution and later that year, the General Assembly adopted a resolution establishing the post of United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights.

This resolution led to the transformation of the Centre for Human Rights into the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights and vested it with a wide-ranging mandate and primary responsibility for human rights in the United Nations system. Twelve years later, at the 2005 UN World Summit, Heads of State from around the world committed themselves to an expansion of the UN human rights programme that recognized the central role and importance of ensuring a human rights approach in all aspects of the UN’s work. This also linked the three pillars of the Organization’s role, namely peace and security, development and human rights. The growth in UN human rights activities reflects the increasing strength of the international human rights movement since the General Assembly adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights on 10 December 1948. Drafted as “a common standard of achievement for all peoples and nations,” the Declaration sets out basic civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights that all human beings should enjoy. Over time, this unprecedented affirmation of human rights has become widely accepted as the standard to which all Governments should adhere. International Human Rights Day is now observed on 10 December around the world. The Declaration, together with the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and its two optional protocols, as well as the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, form the “International Bill of Human Rights.”

As international human rights law developed, a number of UN human rights bodies were established to respond to evolving human rights challenges. These bodies, which rely on the High Commissioner’s Office for substantive and logistical support, are either Charter-based (political bodies with mandates originating in the UN Charter that are composed of States’ representatives) or treaty-based (committees established by international human rights treaties that are mandated to monitor States Parties’ compliance with their treaty obligations and composed of independent experts). The United Nations Commission on Human Rights, which was established in 1946 and reported to the Economic and Social Council, was the key United Nations intergovernmental body responsible for human rights until it was replaced by the Human Rights Council in 2006. In addition to assuming the mandates and responsibilities previously entrusted to the Commission, the Council reports and recommends to the General Assembly on ways to further develop international human rights law. Two years after its first session, the Council operationalized the most recent international human rights mechanism, the Universal Periodic Review.
Exhibit of artwork made by victims of torture held at the Palais des Nations, Geneva, June 2011.
OHCHR at a glance

- Headquarters
- Regional offices/centres
- Country/Stand-alone offices

- Human rights components of peace missions
- Human rights advisers in United Nations Country Teams

** The Country Office in Nepal was closed in December 2011. It is currently in a transitional period to finalize its activities and close its operations.

*** The Country Office in Tunisia is also the temporary location of the Regional Office for North Africa.

Reference to Kosovo should be understood in full compliance with United Nations Security Council resolution 1244 and without prejudice to the status of Kosovo.