Seminar to Address the Adverse Impacts of Climate Change on the Full Enjoyment of Human Rights

23-24 February 2012 – Palais des Nations, Salle XII – Geneva, Switzerland

Presentation by Dr Stephen Humphreys, London School of Economics, panel on International Cooperation and Respect for Human Rights in all Climate Change-related Situations

Thursday, February 23, 2012

Your excellency,

Excellencies,

Distinguished delegates and participants,

Ladies and gentlemen,

Good afternoon. I am deeply grateful to the Office of the High Commissioner for the privilege of being able to address you here today.

[1. Climate science]

I hope you will forgive me if I start with a few observations from the climate science:

1. We have been putting a lot of carbon into the sky and it is full. If we can hold steady the amount of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere **right now**, average global temperature will probably rise by about 2 degrees, which is the current global target. But it might well rise by more.

2. Therefore, to keep greenhouse gas levels steady we will need to emit much less than we do now. The atmosphere can absorb about one third of our current levels. So we will need to cut global emissions by about **two thirds**, and, as a planet, we need to get to that lower level very soon – by about 2050.

3. Of course these **immense global cuts** have to happen while many states of the world continue to increase emissions as they develop. So high emitting countries will need to cut by much more than two-thirds – by an amount closer to 90%. Even then they will still be emitting more than many poor countries.

4. As things stand today, however, we are putting an ***increasing*** amount of carbon into the sky every year. We are now putting **five times as much** greenhouse gas into the atmosphere **each year** as we did in 1950. And the amount increases yearly. The amount of greenhouse gases in the sky now is **40% more** than it was in 1990. Our actions to curb emissions over 20 years have so far had **no** appreciable impact.

5. If we do not cut drastically, at current rates, we will have put so much carbon in the sky by the end of this century that we can expect a global increase in temperature of at least 5 degrees. If that happens, the world's snow and ice will largely disappear. Much of Bangladesh too will disappear, as will Florida. Rivers and coastlines everywhere will be redrawn. Deserts will flourish worldwide.

6. At Copenhagen and Cancun, many states registered voluntary commitments to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. Many of these were ambitious: Britain, for example, promised to cut by 80% by 2050. However, even on the best case scenario – in which all the Copenhagen and Cancun commitments are faithfully implemented – we would still overshoot the 2 degree target by a lot. A three degree rise would be much more likely, and even 4 degrees is possible. The planet has not been that hot for **3 million years**.

[2. International cooperation]

Three conclusions about international cooperation jump out from these five points.

The first conclusion is that, if we are to make any impact on climate change, we will have to ***radically*** change the way we do things. We will have to **dramatically** alter our economies and our lifestyles. Nick Stern, a respected economist and the author of the Stern review is no radical. But he is no longer talking about a 'Green New Deal' – today he speaks of a 'New Industrial Revolution'. Think about that: a *new industrial revolution*.

Stern says we will need to change **every major sector** of our lives and economies – energy use, housing, transport, city planning, agriculture, diet, waste processing. Governments everywhere will need to act, and they will need to act in coordination. At a minimum we will need to **learn** from one another. This is the first point about international cooperation.

The second conclusion is that an intense amount of dedicated commitment will be needed to keep the temperature rise at 2 degrees. The sooner we act the more likely we will be to succeed. But it will only work if there are no outliers. It won't work if today's many low-emitting countries become high-emitters in the future. This means that low-emission countries – the world's poorer countries – will need **clean technologies today** in order to ensure that they do not become **high emitters tomorrow**, as their economies grow. This is the second point about international coordination: we will have become interdependent.

The third conclusion is this: **there will be costs**. We are quite likely to miss our two degree target. But even if we succeed, there will still be immense costs for some countries. At two degrees some islands sink. As we rise above it, we increase the risk of **devastating natural disasters, floods, hurricanes, and so on**. There are feedback loops that may create unexpected hardships. A lot is unpredictable.

What is certain is that those who will suffer most, in terms of human rights – those whose rights to food, water, shelter, health, culture – will be most profoundly affected – are those persons who are **most vulnerable** to the effects of climate change.

Vulnerability comprises two principal components. One, of course, is **exposure** to the changes wrought by the climate. The second is about **resources**. People are less vulnerable when they have the wherewithal to adapt to the changes brought about by climate change.

So this is the third point about international cooperation: we will need to rely on one another; vulnerable persons and populations will need help.

[3. Protecting human rights]

Three types of international cooperation are needed, then, if the human rights consequences of climate change are to be avoided.

First, international cooperation in adjusting our economies – and in the way we manage the **global** economy. It is not merely that we produce too much carbon, it is that we consume **far too much** as a planet, while

many of us still have **too little** to live on. And it is that we distribute resources in a way that increases vulnerability.

Second, international cooperation is vital in **transferring clean technologies** to countries that are poor, in order that they may grow.

And third, we need international cooperation in adaptation, to ensure that those **most affected** by climate change can **prepare for the worst** and **recover** should they be hit.

The record on international cooperation has not been good in any of these three areas. In part thanks to individuals in this room, Durban was not a failure. But the agreement doesn't get us very far and doesn't begin to respond to the urgency climate change poses to human rights. Everyone agrees that we can and must do better.

For those interested in human rights – in the fulfilment of the Universal Declaration's promise of a 'social and international order in which human rights can be fulfilled' – there are at least four areas where we must focus in future.

The first is to push hard for deep cuts in emissions, as soon as possible. Here the rich countries are no longer leading the way, but they would do well to regain the initiative.

The second is to activate fully and generously the technology transfer provisions in the UNFCCC process. Without technology transfer, much of the world will be condemned to a **poor quality of life** with all the deterioration in human rights that flows from poverty.

The third is to operationalize and vastly increase adaptation funding. This is the principal means by which the human rights harms caused **directly** by climate-related damage may be avoided and remedied.

The fourth is to seek to promote the radical change needed to our economies and lifestyles. Without such **radical** change, the reality of climate change will make a mockery of our hopes and dreams of a better world, the dream ensconced in our human rights treaties.

Thank you very much.