

**Expert Workshop on  
Human Rights and International Solidarity,  
7-8 June 2012**



**Opening statement by  
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**OHCHR**

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Distinguished Experts, Colleagues, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am pleased to welcome you to this workshop on behalf of the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights. Over the next two days you will explore a topic of vital importance to the international community, under the able stewardship of Ms. Virginia Dandan, the independent expert on human rights and international solidarity of the Human Rights Council, a veteran human rights defender, and a longstanding friend of the UN human rights programme. Virginia, what a pleasure it is to be with you here today, and to have the opportunity to contribute to this important, and exciting human rights work.

Ladies and gentlemen,

In an interdependent world faced by interconnected crises and in the midst of the tremors of phenomenal- indeed historic change, this workshop provides us with a vital space to reflect on an issue that, while both essential and instinctive at its core, is also fraught with challenges—both conceptual and political.

Throughout the history of the modern human rights movement, international solidarity has been among the most powerful and essential tools of advocates and activists seeking to advance the vision of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Through such solidarity, the righteous calls of the victim and the vulnerable, the oppressed and the abused, have been amplified by human rights defenders across the world, resulting in a global chorus that has, in these sixty-plus years, helped to shake the very foundations of apartheid, colonialism, foreign occupation, repressive regimes, racist systems, undemocratic governments, and autocratic rulers. Indigenous peoples, minorities, migrants, human rights activists, political dissidents, prisoners and vulnerable and marginalized groups of every stripe have found hope in the central message of solidarity—that, in your call for freedom from fear, freedom from want, and an end to discrimination, you are not alone.

Indeed, the international human rights movement has demonstrated time and time again that the mobilization of international solidarity has the capacity to wrest control of the public narrative away from powerful forces that defend and reinforce an abusive status quo, and return it to the hands of the people and those who defend their rights. And this, as demonstrated by the human rights struggles of people from Johannesburg to Tunis, From Berlin to Cairo, from Guatemala to Gaza, and from Birmingham Alabama to Birmingham England, has changed history.

In response to today's global challenges, international solidarity can equally build bridges to support good governance both nationally and globally. It can help to strengthen accountability for human rights, promote democracy and the rule of law, foster sustainable development, expose inequalities within and between nations, and advance the empowered participation of people, including women, youth, older persons, minorities and marginalized groups. And it can help to build a global constituency for a more just regulation of globalization and more equitable arrangements for trade, investment, finance, aid, debt, technology transfer, intellectual property, migration, labour, environment, and the global partnership for development.

Madame Chair, distinguished experts,

Supporting human rights solidarity is no radical foray for the United Nations. It is rather at the very core of this Organization's purpose. When 'the Peoples of the United Nations' came together as a single collective of humanity under the United Nations Charter, the international community spoke in one voice, inspired by a collective resolve to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war, to reaffirm faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person, in the equal rights of men and women and of nations large and small. They committed to promoting social progress and better standards of life in larger freedom and to use international co-operation to solve international problems and to ensure respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms.

Already in 1948, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights recognized that all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights, and affirmed that everyone is entitled to a social and international order in which the rights and freedoms in the UDHR could be fully realized.

This means all people, everywhere. And it means all human rights- civil, political, economic, social, and cultural, as well as, since 1986, the right to development. It includes the full range of individual rights- -fair trial, freedom from torture and from summary executions, the rights to health, housing and education, free expression and association- as well as internationally guaranteed collective rights, such as self-determination, and the rights of indigenous peoples.

And, as modern international law has taken hold, we have seen a gradual redefinition of this Organization's understanding of sovereignty, from one of national borders as virtually impermeable walls, to a view of sovereignty as responsibility—a trust that flows from the people— and in which the ultimate test of the legitimacy of a government is the degree to which it guarantees freedom from fear and want for all its people, without discrimination. A host of broadly-ratified international treaties attest to this.

Today, as a matter of law, the days when governments could credibly claim that human rights were “a matter of the internal affairs of a state”, are gone.

Genocide, war crimes, crimes against humanity, ethnic cleansing, apartheid, and other gross violations of human rights- all demand a strong and collective response, both by the international community of states, and by global civil society. So, too, do poverty and deprivation, disasters and humanitarian crises necessitate the mobilization of support from all who are in a position to help.

Dear colleagues,

Importantly, many in this room have made notable contributions to the development of international legal thinking on obligations of international cooperation, as contained in the UN Charter and in the two principal human rights covenants, as well as on extraterritorial obligations associated with economic, social and cultural rights – from the Limburg Principles, to the Maastricht Guidelines, and most recently the Maastricht Principles on Extraterritorial Obligations of States, touching on both positive and negative obligations that extend beyond national borders.

And, indeed, even beyond the realm of law, there is evidence everywhere that we have entered an age of solidarity. Dramatic failures in financial governance in recent years have heightened cries for social justice, unified movements across borders, and sparked calls for more equity and more accountability in economic affairs. Military threats and aggression have mobilized the largest peace demonstrations in the history of the world. Environmental degradation has led to a determined push back from all corners of the planet, demanding better stewardship of the Earth.

Crucially, modern communication technologies, social media, and new modes of networking mean that talk of “global civil society” is no longer mere rhetoric, but a practical reality of our day. The voices of victims, human rights defenders, and ordinary people from the streets of Tunis, London, Wall Street, Santiago and beyond, have been echoed on twitter, Facebook, Youtube, and text-messaging, bounced from city to city and country to country. As a result, international coalitions have sprung up with lightning speed, and information on violations- and strategies for confronting them- are received across the globe in real time. As the High Commissioner commented last year, “human rights have gone viral.”

At the same time, however, we have also seen attempts with equal vigor to block efforts at human rights solidarity, using cyber technology, misinformation campaigns, diplomatic pressure, and even deadly force for this purpose. And, despite decades of human rights campaigning, democracy promotion, international judicial developments, and economic growth, millions continue to live without freedom, dignity, or justice.

As such, the time for a serious discussion on international solidarity and human rights, based on the existing provisions of international human rights law, and opportunities for its progressive development, has clearly come.

For our part, the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights remains strongly committed to supporting this initiative, and to advancing international solidarity for the realization of all human rights - civil, political, economic, social and cultural, including the right to development.

Welcome, once again, and thank you. We wish you a fruitful discussion.