

**Photo Credits**

Cover and back page: Textile design: Pat Augsburger, Phyllis Ressler, Denis Maust. Photograph: Jonathan Charles.  
Inside cover: © UN/DPI IMG0032 – © UN/DPI IMG0005 – E. Debebe, © UN/DPI #187532C – T. Bolstad © UNHCR – G. Malempré © UNESCO – © UN/DPI #148040C – G. Malempré © UNESCO – © UN/DPI IMG0040 – L. Boscardi © UNHCR – G. Malempré © UNESCO # 30200080 –D. Bregnard © UNHCR. Page 2: © Photo Bianco, Geneva Page 3: © UN/DPI #187401C – E. Debebe, © UN/DPI #187725C, Page 4: G. Malempré © UNESCO # 30200502 – S. Mann © UNICEF/HQ 01-0093, Page 5: © UN/DPI 23783 – © UN/DPI #148048C – © UN/DPI #152747, Page 6: G. Malempré © UNESCO, Page 7: M. Soler-Roca © UNESCO #10019301, Page 8: © UN/DPI #152390C, Page 9: © UN/DPI #187325C, Page 10: © T. Brown – G. Malempré © UNESCO, Page 11: © UN/DPI, Page 12: © UN/DPI, Page 13: G. Malempré © UNESCO – G. Malempré © UNESCO, Page 14: © UN/DPI #147440C, Page 15: E. Schneider © UN/DPI #EDS207, Page 16: © OHCHR – J. Isaac © UN/DPI #154730, Page 17: G. Malempré © UNESCO, Page 18: G. Malempré © UNESCO – © UN/DPI #148369C, Page 19: © Photo Bianco, Geneva – G. Malempré © UNESCO # 30200147 – G. Malempré © UNESCO # 30200140, Page 20: © F. Maldoni, Page 21: ILO – X. Istasse © ILO, Page 22: © UN/DPI #151906C, Page 23: © UN/DPI #159636C – © UN/DPI #186609C, Page 24: V. Taveau © OHCHR.

# OHCHR



# OHCHR

OHCHR-UNOG

8-14 Avenue de la Paix

1211 Geneva 10,

Switzerland

Telephone: (+41-22) 917-9000

E-mail: [webadmin.hchr@unog.ch](mailto:webadmin.hchr@unog.ch)



Design and production: Louma productions

© OHCHR 2002

The Office of  
the United Nations  
High Commissioner for  
**Human  
Rights**

# OHCHR



Cover and back page: textiles collected from indigenous peoples around the world and joined together to illustrate beauty in diversity. The textiles were first exhibited at the opening ceremony of the United Nations International Year of the World's Indigenous People in 1993.

**“The human person is at the centre of everything the United Nations does.”**

## Preface



- This booklet introduces the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights and describes its role in the United Nations human rights programme. That programme works to promote and defend the human rights of everyone all over the world.

The United Nations vision is of a world in which the human rights of all are fully respected and enjoyed in conditions of global peace. The High Commissioner's role is to keep that vision to the forefront through constant encouragement of the international community and its member States to uphold universally agreed human rights standards. It is our role to alert Governments and the world community to the daily reality that these standards are too often ignored or unfulfilled and to be a voice for the victims of human rights violations everywhere. It is also our role to press the international community to take the steps that can prevent violations, including support for the right to development. The human person is at the centre of everything the United Nations does. The human rights message is one of hope and empowerment. We can all make a difference by becoming aware of how the different parts of the international human rights system, including the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, seek to encourage the implementation of internationally agreed standards where they matter, in the daily lives of people. We all have a part to play in making the enjoyment of all human rights a reality for everyone.

High Commissioner for Human Rights





*The Palais Wilson once housed the League of Nations and is now the home of OHCHR.*

# The role of the High Commissioner

**The role of the High Commissioner for Human Rights is to promote respect for and observance of all human rights for all.**

The High Commissioner is the principal UN official with responsibility for human rights and is accountable to the Secretary-General. The post of High Commissioner was created in 1993. The Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) is based at the Palais Wilson in Geneva, Switzerland, with an office at United Nations Headquarters in New York. There are OHCHR representatives and advisers in all regions as well as field staff in a number of countries. OHCHR has more than 400 staff world-wide. In 2001, OHCHR's total income was US\$ 52.8 million, of which US\$ 21.4 million came from the United Nations regular budget and US\$ 31.4 million from voluntary contributions. There are different UN human rights institutions and agencies. All have the common aim of promoting and protecting internationally agreed human rights - civil, cultural, economic, political and social. These rights





were first proclaimed in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (see box). Every person on the globe is equally entitled to enjoy them and the task given to the High Commissioner is to strengthen the efforts of the United Nations to implement all of them.

**Leadership**

The High Commissioner seeks to lead the international human rights movement by acting as a moral authority and voice for victims. The High Commissioner makes frequent public statements and appeals on human rights crises and travels widely to ensure that the human rights message is heard in all parts of the globe. At the same time the High Commissioner engages in dialogue and builds constructive cooperation with Governments to strengthen national human rights protection. The Office seeks to work with an ever wider range of actors, including NGOs, academic institutions and the private sector, to instil commitment to human rights as widely as possible. It promotes human rights education and seeks to stimulate thinking on prevention as well as on new challenges such as trafficking in people, HIV/AIDS, biotechnology and the effects of globalization.

**Mainstreaming human rights in the United Nations**

The High Commissioner has been given the task of integrating human rights thinking and standards

**The Universal Declaration of Human Rights**

The idea of human rights did not begin with the establishment of the United Nations - its roots can be found in all world cultures and religions. However, the adoption of the Universal Declaration by the UN General Assembly in 1948 was a landmark achievement in world history as it was the first time that the international community set down formal standards of human rights and freedoms that should be enjoyed by everyone, everywhere. The Universal Declaration proclaims that respect for human rights "is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world". Since agreeing on the Universal Declaration, the

international community has pursued what is a continuing task, to make the Declaration's ideals effective.

The Universal Declaration is now available in over three hundred languages, which makes it the most translated document in the world.

*Eleanor Roosevelt led and chaired the commission that developed the historic Universal Declaration of Human Rights.*



Children, among the most vulnerable members of society, require special measures of protection. But they are also entitled to all human rights and freedoms, including participation in daily decision-making processes.

*Over 300,000 children are serving in government or rebel forces in more than 30 armed conflicts in the world.*





throughout the work of the Organization. OHCHR works with other parts of the UN to achieve this goal and participates fully in each of the UN's programmes - peace and security, economic and social affairs, development cooperation and humanitarian affairs.

**Making the UN human rights programme more effective within countries**

The High Commissioner seeks to bring together different institutions and organizations working for human rights throughout the world and to encourage them to combine with the UN system in advancing human rights. OHCHR encourages links between national, regional and international groups and organizations to ensure practical implementation of the findings and recommendations of international human rights bodies. To foster those links, OHCHR has working agreements with many organizations, has appointed regional representatives and advisers, and has set up field offices.

**Supporting international human rights bodies**

The High Commissioner seeks to offer the highest quality research, expertise, advice and administrative services to the main UN human rights bodies. OHCHR provides support for the meetings of the United Nations Commission on Human Rights and

*By the end of 2001, an estimated 40 million people were living with HIV. The red ribbon expresses solidarity with them.*



**HIV/AIDS**

Human rights empower those seeking to prevent the spread of HIV/AIDS. OHCHR contributes to the global effort to tackle the epidemic by addressing the root causes of vulnerability to infection, combating HIV/AIDS-related stigma and discrimination, and promoting a comprehensive rights-based approach to fighting the epidemic.



its Sub-Commission and follow-up to their deliberations. Its staff assist the numerous experts appointed by these bodies in investigating and reporting on human rights issues. It also prepares the work of the UN committees that monitor how States fulfil their human rights obligations. OHCHR ensures a communication flow between these international bodies to maximize the impact of their efforts.

**Providing access to human rights information and promoting human rights education**

The High Commissioner disseminates information on human rights and promotes human rights education worldwide. Working with the UN Department of Public Information, OHCHR ensures that records of the meetings of human rights bodies are immediately available to the media with some webcast. It publishes extensively and maintains a web site that makes all official documents and information on international human rights developments accessible to millions. ■



**FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION**

Freedom of expression is vital for democracy. The Universal Declaration states that: "Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers."





# OHCHR's Technical Cooperation Programme

**OHCHR works closely with States to enhance national capacities to promote and protect human rights.**

Human rights standards have little value if they are not implemented. States recovering from conflict or lacking adequate resources or expertise need assistance to implement their human rights obligations. OHCHR devotes much of its resources – through its Technical Cooperation Programme – to supporting States' national efforts to protect human rights. When asked, OHCHR conducts assessments of domestic human rights needs. This is done in consultation with the Government, and with the broadest possible national participation, including parliament, the courts and civil society. It can result in the preparation of a national plan that identifies areas in need of improvement and outlines a strategy for action. Among the activities included in such plans are: assistance for efforts to incorporate international human rights standards into national laws, policies



## EDUCATION

Education is vital for personal, social and economic development. Lack of education inhibits the ability to pursue and enjoy other human rights. The Millennium Declaration calls for primary school education to be available to all children by 2015.

*Globally, there are 130 million primary-school-age children not in school. Approximately two thirds are girls.*



## JUSTICE

OHCHR seeks to uphold standards which guarantee the right to fair trial and humane treatment in detention. OHCHR and the human rights mechanisms deal with such issues as: arbitrary detention, enforced or involuntary disappearances, extrajudicial executions, torture, death penalty, impunity, independence of judges and lawyers, and prison administration.



*In some countries people are detained for months or even years before they are brought to court.*





and practices; advice on the establishment and functioning of independent national human rights institutions; advice to the judiciary, military, police and parliaments on international standards related to their work; advice on treaty reporting; and advice on human rights education.

Many of these activities are financed by the Voluntary Fund for Technical Cooperation in the Field of Human Rights, which processes and directs funds provided by donor Governments. ■



*Up to 100 million people are homeless throughout the world, the majority of them women and dependent children.*

## National Institutions

**An independent national body to promote and protect human rights is increasingly accepted.**

OHCHR plays a major role in encouraging and assisting the creation of independent national human rights institutions, such as a human rights commission, to help realize human rights in each country. The purpose of such bodies is to advise Governments and parliaments on international human rights obligations and on human rights protection needs in the country. All national institutions have the role of promoting awareness of human rights and many have responsibility for receiving complaints from individuals about violations of their rights. The Office can offer best practice advice based on its extensive experience in helping to establish national institutions. The Office provides guidance and practical training based on United Nations standards to ensure that national institutions are genuinely independent and effective. ■

### HOUSING

Adequate housing is a basic human right. Having a secure place to live is a requirement of human dignity and is necessary for physical and mental health and overall quality of life.



### POVERTY

Extreme poverty denies people basic human rights such as adequate housing, food, education and health care. It also inhibits enjoyment of other human rights, such as political participation.



# Regional strategies

OHCHR encourages regional dialogue and co-operation on best practices in securing human rights protection.

OHCHR seeks to identify human rights concerns that are important to countries within a single region. It can then offer help, at both regional and country level, by promoting the exchange and dissemination of experience and best practices.

Regional representatives have been appointed to enable OHCHR to adopt a strategic approach when working at country and regional level. The representatives have close working relationships with governmental bodies, UN country teams, international and regional organizations, national institutions and non-governmental organizations. Their presence in the regions enhances the Office's visibility and increases awareness of its advisory services.

*In developing countries alone, 1.2 billion people lack access to drinkable water and 2.4 billion people have no access to sanitation.*



*Agriculture plays an important role in development. And yet arable land per person is shrinking, from 0.38 hectares in 1970 to 0.23 in 2000, with a projected decline to 0.15 hectares per person by 2050.*

*At the beginning of 2002 there were 19,783,100 people of concern to the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, of which: 12,051,100 were refugees; 6,328,400 were internally displaced, stateless and war-affected populations; 940,800 were asylum-seekers; and 462,700 returned refugees.*





# Working in countries

OHCHR has staff working in countries to support human rights.



OHCHR has established an increasing number of field presences. Some staff focus on monitoring human rights practices and investigating human rights abuses. Many work on implementing technical cooperation projects to strengthen a State's capacity to fulfil its human rights obligations. They advise on new human rights policies and institutions and undertake human rights training for the judiciary, the police, the military and others. OHCHR headquarters and field-based staff work with the United Nations Development Group, the United Nations Development Programme, UNICEF, WHO, the World Bank, UN country teams and others to integrate human rights standards and human rights principles of popular participation, accountability, non-discrimination and empowerment into development policies and country programmes.

An OHCHR staff member in Cambodia accompanying indigenous minority victims of land-grabbing to the provincial court.



OHCHR is involved in United Nations' peacekeeping and peace-building work. The Office plays an important part in human rights components of complex field operations run by the UN Departments of Peacekeeping Operations and Political Affairs and now contributes to the work of the UN Security Council, which is responsible for international peace and security. These developments reflect the more prominent role that human rights are playing in all aspects of the UN's work. ■

A man proudly displaying his identity card, which allowed him to vote at legislative elections in the Central African Republic, November 1998.



## DEMOCRACY

Today, over 120 nations – with two thirds of the world's population – are engaged in building democratic societies based on fundamental human rights principles.



## DISABILITIES

People with disabilities are vulnerable to discrimination and social exclusion. They may be denied health care, opportunities for employment and other human rights to which they are entitled. OHCHR works with its partners to address such problems.



# Human rights education

Knowing our rights is taking the first step to realizing them.



Human rights can only be achieved through an informed and continued demand by people for their protection. Human rights education promotes values, beliefs and attitudes that encourage all individuals to uphold their own rights and those of others. It develops an understanding of everyone's common responsibility to make human rights a reality in each community. Human rights education constitutes an essential contribution to the long-term prevention of human rights abuses and represents an important investment in the endeavour to achieve a just society in which all human rights of all persons are valued and respected. The High Commissioner is the co-ordinator of the United Nations Decade for Human Rights Education 1995-2004. ■



OHCHR conducts training sessions on human rights and democracy for the Cambodian military and police.



## OHCHR is working to promote human rights education by:

- Developing human rights education and training materials;
- Supporting national efforts for human rights education, in the context of its Technical Cooperation programme;
- Facilitating information-sharing, through international and regional seminars and workshops and the development of educational resources ;
- Supporting local efforts for human rights education through the Assisting Communities Together project which provides financial assistance to human rights grass-roots initiatives.



### FREEDOM OF CONSCIENCE

Everyone is entitled to freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief. Many people suffer violence and discrimination because of their beliefs. The UN works for the elimination of religious intolerance and the acceptance of diversity of religion and belief.



### FOOD

Enough food is produced to feed the entire world population, yet many millions of people die every year, and many more are undernourished, because they do not have access to adequate food. The right to adequate food recognizes the fundamental right of everyone to be free from hunger so as to be able fully to develop and maintain their physical and mental capacities. OHCHR is contributing to the efforts of the international community to achieve food security for all.

*According to the Food and Agriculture Organization, there are 815 million chronically undernourished people in the world.*



# Working with the Commission on Human Rights

OHCHR provides support to the United Nations Commission and to its mechanisms.



The Commission on Human Rights is the principal United Nations intergovernmental body concerned with the realization of human rights in the world. It is an important forum for the discussion, study, elaboration and monitoring of human rights standards.

## ■ The Sub-Commission on the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights

The Sub-Commission is the Commission's main subsidiary body and 'think tank'. Its principal task is to undertake studies and make recommendations to the Commission on a variety of human rights issues. The Sub-Commission is composed of 26 experts, elected by the Commission, and meets in Geneva for three weeks each August.

The Commission comprises 53 States from the different regions of the world. It meets each year for six weeks in March/April in Geneva with the participation of over 3,000 delegates from UN member and



observer States and from non-governmental organizations. At each session the Commission adopts around one hundred resolutions, decisions and statements on a wide range of human rights issues. OHCHR provides support to the meetings of the Commission and assists the experts who are appointed by it to report on specific human rights issues (see box). OHCHR undertakes other activities for the Commission including research, the preparation of studies and the organization of seminars. The High Commissioner submits an annual report to the

Commission. It draws attention to pressing human rights concerns around the world and suggests priorities for the coming year. ■

## ■ The role of the Commission's special procedures

The Commission appoints experts (the 'special procedures') to monitor and publicly report on global trends and country-specific situations. As of January 2002 there were 37 such experts, dealing with a wide range of issues ranging from the occurrence of torture in the world, to the right to food, education and health. Experts may visit individual countries. Some have an 'urgent action' function which authorizes contact with State authorities concerning serious human rights violations. They can request clarification and seek assurances that the rights of alleged victims will be protected. Such appeals frequently result in a positive outcome.



### WOMEN

The demand that women be treated as equal in human dignity is at the heart of human rights. But the fine words of human rights texts stand in sharp contrast to the daily reality of life for millions of women. The eradication of all forms of discrimination on the grounds of sex and the full and equal participation of women in political, civil, economic, social and cultural life are priority objectives for OHCHR and for every part of the UN system.



According to the United Nations Development Programme, only 16 countries have women in more than 25 per cent of the seats in national parliaments or 20 per cent of the ministerial posts.



# Working human with the rights treaty system

OHCHR acts as the secretariat to the treaty bodies and campaigns for universal adoption of human rights treaties.

Human rights treaties are an essential part of the international community's efforts to protect human rights. Treaties are legally binding documents, agreed to by Governments. By adopting international treaties, States agree to be legally bound to uphold the individual rights and freedoms of everyone under their jurisdiction. How well States keep their promises is monitored by committees, or "treaty bodies", composed of independent experts. They are the "guardians" of the treaties. States must submit regular reports to the treaty bodies so that the implementation of their commitments can be examined. They present their reports publicly and the committees make observations and recommendations. As part of a continuing dialogue, the treaty bodies monitor and comment on follow-up action by States.

Several of the human rights treaties have individual complaints procedures which allow the treaty bodies to consider complaints of human rights violations from individuals. If the treaty body concludes that there has been a violation, the State concerned is expected to provide a remedy. An OHCHR petitions team processes complaints and oversees the follow-up to decisions.

Human rights treaties enjoy a high level of ratification by States. OHCHR works for the acceptance by all countries of all human rights treaties. It is campaigning to have all countries ratify the core human rights treaties (see box). ■

## ■ The core human rights treaties

- International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (1965)
- International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (1966)
- International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (1966)
- Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (1979)
- Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (1984)
- Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989)
- International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families (1990)



### MINORITIES

Almost all countries have minority groups. Although minority groups bring diversity and cultural richness, they are often among the most disadvantaged groups in society and can be subjected to discrimination and injustice and excluded from meaningful participation in public and political life. Ensuring the rights of persons belonging to minorities acknowledges the dignity and equality of all individuals.



### TRAFFICKING

Violations of human rights are both a cause and a consequence of trafficking in persons. Accordingly, human rights must be at the core of any anti-trafficking strategy. OHCHR's key objective is to integrate human rights into international, regional and national anti-trafficking initiatives.



According to recent estimates, more than 700,000 people are trafficked every year for sexual exploitation and forced labour.

# The World Conference Against Racism

An extensive  
and ambitious  
Programme of  
Action

The World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance took place in Durban, South Africa, in 2001. It adopted a Declaration and Programme of Action to eliminate racism and to encourage acceptance of human diversity and interdependence. This will require educational measures, tougher national legislation and legal assistance to victims of racial discrimination. OHCHR is spearheading the implementation of a global campaign against racism and xenophobia. It will work with UN agencies, regional human rights organizations, governments, national human rights institutions and non-governmental organizations fighting racism. ■

# The Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues

OHCHR plays an  
important role in the  
new Permanent Forum  
on Indigenous Issues

In 2002, the UN Economic and Social Council created a high-level advisory body, the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues. The Forum is composed of sixteen experts, the majority drawn from indigenous peoples. Eight were nominated by indigenous peoples and eight by governments. The Forum will address economic and social development, culture, the environment, education, health and human rights. OHCHR is committed to ongoing support of the Permanent Forum through a UN Inter-agency Support Group, which will provide a coordinated response to the Forum's recommendations. ■



## Working with civil society

OHCHR works closely with non-governmental organizations on the promotion and protection of all human rights.

### OHCHR-administered funds to support NGOs

- Voluntary Fund for Victims of Torture
- Voluntary Trust Fund on Contemporary Forms of Slavery
- Voluntary Fund for Indigenous Populations
- Voluntary Fund for the International Decade of the World's Indigenous People
- OHCHR Indigenous Fellowship Programme
- Assisting Communities Together (ACT)

Local, national and international human rights NGOs are a vital part of the international human rights movement. They alert the world to human rights violations. They defend victims, promote human rights through education and campaign for improvements. NGOs increasingly work with the treaty bodies and the Commission. They provide information on human rights concerns to these bodies and monitor how their recommendations to Governments are followed up in practice. The Office also works with academic institutions and encourages research and policy studies that can advance human rights protection. OHCHR administers the provision of financial support to NGOs from a number of trust funds supported by Governments and other donors. ■



### HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS

Human rights defenders, often the target of attack because of their work, need to be defended as well.

OHCHR trains NGO staff members at its headquarters in Geneva, Switzerland.

www.unhchr.ch

## Find out more about OHCHR's work



Learn more about our work from our web site ([www.unhchr.ch](http://www.unhchr.ch)). You will also find a link to information on OHCHR publications. Many can be read online. Most are available in all the official languages of the United Nations: Arabic, Chinese, English, French, Russian and Spanish. OHCHR publications are distributed free of charge. Contact:

OHCHR-UNOG  
8-14 Avenue de la Paix  
1211 Geneva 10, Switzerland  
Telephone: (+41-22) 917-9000  
E-mail: [webadmin.hchr@unog.ch](mailto:webadmin.hchr@unog.ch)

For more information on the work of the United Nations, visit the web site below. Through this site you will find links to the many UN agencies that make up the United Nations human rights programme.

www.un.org

