

**TWELFTH ANNUAL MEETING OF THE ASIA PACIFIC FORUM
OF NATIONAL HUMAN RIGHTS INSTITUTIONS**

(24 - 27 September 2007, Sydney)

Message by the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights
Ms. Louise Arbour

Distinguished representatives,
Ladies and gentlemen,

I would like to express appreciation for the invitation to address the 12th Annual Meeting of the Asia Pacific Forum, the main goal of which is to enhance human rights cooperation in the Asia Pacific region through the promotion and strengthening of national human rights institutions. I am particularly heartened by the important and innovative items that feature on the agenda of this meeting, including the role of national human rights institutions in environmental issues as well as the topic of the rights of people with disabilities. Your meeting comes at an important time in light of initiatives to institutionalise regional cooperation on human rights, particularly the establishment of an ASEAN human rights mechanism.

I am especially pleased to see on your agenda the role of national human rights institutions regarding the issue of disability, as it highlights the renewed importance of national human rights institutions in this field. This role has been crystallized by the newly adopted Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, which offers new opportunities for national human rights institutions, through a provision on national monitoring requiring each State Party to establish a protection, promotion and monitoring framework that conforms to the Paris Principles.

Still today, the Asia Pacific region faces very particular challenges in terms of human rights, as well as in terms of the existing structures available to address human rights violations. Two thirds of the world's population live in the Asia Pacific region, and two thirds of the world's people living in extreme poverty live in this region. This situation of abject poverty violates several human rights, such as the right to an adequate standard of living, the right to health or the right to education. In addition, poverty has a multiplying effect on other rights, by depriving poor people of ways to make their voices heard, and perpetuating a situation that is often inescapable.

Moreover, structures of support, either at the national or regional level are often absent in the Asia-Pacific region. The region, for example, has no comprehensive human rights instrument and no human rights mechanism yet. Governments in the region are often reluctant to cooperate with the international human rights system, either through the ratification of international human rights treaties, through the extension of standing invitations to Special Procedure mandate holders, through regular and timely reporting to human rights treaty bodies, or through effective follow up to the recommendations coming out of the international human rights system. In addition, at the national level, civil society and national human rights institutions are often weak and constrained by Governments.

It is in this light that I want to stress the crucial importance of having national human rights institutions in place that are in full compliance with the Paris Principles. National human rights institutions are an indispensable part of a strong national human rights protection system, along with an independent judiciary, a properly functioning administration of justice, a representative national parliament (ideally

with a standing human rights body), and strong and dynamic civil society organizations. National human rights institutions also have a growing potential to be active in the international human rights system, for example, with regard to the human rights treaty bodies. They may be involved in the processes of State reporting, follow-up to treaty body recommendations, capacity building at the national level with regard to the reporting process, as well as petitions and enquiry procedures. Furthermore, they can also play a key role regarding Special Procedure mandate holders, contributing to the preparation, implementation and follow up action to country visits.

As reflected in OHCHR Plan of Action, my Office accords great importance to issues such as transitional justice, accountability, rule of law and national systems of human rights protection, including institutional capacities for the administration of justice and remedies available for those claiming their rights. Therefore we strongly support national human rights institutions to play an effective role in developing and consolidating credible human rights systems in the region.

Last but not least, the newly established Human Rights Council acknowledges the crucial role of national human rights institutions, as it allows those that are in compliance with the Paris Principles to address any item on its agenda. In this light, I am glad that regional coordinating bodies of national human rights institutions, such as the Asia Pacific Forum, have been formally given the right to participate in the Human Rights Council as observers, giving them the same participation rights as individual Paris Principles compliant national human rights institutions, provided that they speak on behalf of A-status NHRIs.

Given the specific human rights challenges as well as the absence of a regional human rights mechanism in the Asia-Pacific region, this right to participation should be regarded as an important success for the protection of human rights in the region. I therefore encourage an active participation in the international human rights arena, and especially the Human Rights Council by national human rights institutions and the APF. The upcoming universal periodic review mechanism will provide another important entry point to fulfil this enhanced role.

OHCHR recognizes the importance of national human rights institutions, especially in the Asia-Pacific region. In fact, the establishment and strengthening of national human rights institutions in compliance with the Paris Principles is one of the priorities of the Asia-Pacific Regional Framework, within which OHCHR will continue to work, in cooperation with Member States and United Nations Country Teams. As emphasised in the Bali Actions points, adopted in July 2007, our Office welcomes the activities by national human rights institutions in support of regional cooperation. Once firmly in place, national human rights institutions should as much as possible seek to develop regional and sub-regional ties with sister institutions.

The benefits of developing these regional networks include the sharing of best practices, the exchange of staff, the development of joint technical cooperation projects, the sharing of information, the development of expert rosters comprised of national human rights institutions staff, as well as the strengthening of the national position in case of a threat from the authorities.

In this respect, I would like to sincerely congratulate the national human rights institutions of Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines and Thailand, for the adoption of the Declaration of Cooperation on human rights issues and a Position Paper on the human rights aspect of the ASEAN Charter. These initiatives represent, not only a great achievement for national human rights institutions but also an important contribution in the field of human rights in the ASEAN region. We have a particular opportunity in the coming months to institutionalise new arrangements within the ASEAN Charter, and I hope we can work together towards this goal.

I am also pleased to inform you that a regional workshop intended for countries that do not yet have a national human rights institution is planned in Manila in mid-October, in cooperation with the Commission on Human Rights of the Philippines and the active participation and support of the APF.

It is in this light that I am glad and encouraged to speak at this annual meeting, as it is a manifestation of the growing role and effectiveness of the APF in the Asia-Pacific Region. I wish you most productive discussions.

I thank you for your attention.