

Network of National Human Rights Institutions of the Americas – February 2004

Inspired by Asia Pacific Forum, and with the encouragement of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, the idea for the Network emerged in 2000 with the aim of bringing together national human rights institutions of the hemisphere, whether human rights commissions or Public Defenders, to share best practices, training and expertise. The objectives of the Network are: to promote a culture of respect for human rights in the hemisphere; to strengthen recognition and implementation of international commitments; to contribute to democratic development; and work together to strengthen existing national human rights institutions and to support the development of new and emerging National Human Rights Institutions in accordance with the 1991 "Paris Principles", endorsed by the UN Commission on Human Rights (resolution 1992/54) and by the UN General Assembly (resolution A/RES/48/134 of 20/12/1993). The Network is an outstanding opportunity to consolidate efforts to strengthen democracy in the hemisphere.

Membership is now comprised of 13 "Paris Principles" accredited national human rights institutions: Argentina, Bolivia, Canada, Colombia, Costa Rica, Ecuador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, Venezuela. The Network also welcomes a number of observers such as Antigua and Barbuda, Barbados, Belize, Haiti, Jamaica, Saint Lucia, Trinidad and Tobago, the Association of Caribbean Ombudsmen, UNHCHR, UNESCO, and the Inter-American Institute for Human Rights. The Co-ordination Committee (CC) established by the Network Statutes provides guidance on the activities of the Network and on its development. It comprises the national institutions of Canada, Mexico, Costa Rica and Colombia.

The first General Assembly of the Network was held in Kingston, Jamaica in March 2002, to recognize the important contribution to the promotion and protection of human rights made by Public Defenders of the Caribbean region, and to encourage greater cooperation between Caribbean and Latin American human rights institutions. Marked by a spirit of openness and cooperation amongst participants, the meeting resulted with the formal adoption of Statutes and of a Strategic Plan to guide future development of the Network. Immediately following the First General Assembly, the Network held a workshop dedicated to the rights of indigenous peoples in the hemisphere. In March 2003, the Network held its Second General Assembly in Costa Rica where members adopted a 2-year work plan and a funding strategy, followed by a workshop on the rights of persons with disabilities. In September 2003, the Network hosted an expert workshop on "Security Measures and Human Rights – The Role of National Human Rights Institutions. These activities were funded by Canada's Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade and the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights.

The Network provides a means whereby the strength and effectiveness of members is reinforced through collaboration and synergy. Regular events provide opportunities for reviewing activities and sharing expertise. Network activities address common issues and concerns, by exploring regional approaches and identifying priority areas for technical assistance.

In general, regional networks of this nature also provide a system of support and protection against domestic actions that threaten a member's independence. Since the Network's creation, it has made representations in support of two national institutions in both Colombia and Argentina.

In the case of Colombia, the Office of the *Defensor* was threatened with either complete abolition or merger with the government, which would have effectively ended its independence and jeopardized its international status as an impartial human rights institution under the Paris Principles. As a result of representations by the Network, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights intervened directly with the President of Colombia to successfully press for protection of the independent status of the Colombian institution. In the case of Argentina, the *Defensor* was subjected to death threats and the Network made representations, urging the government of Argentina to provide support and protection.

The United Nations has been instrumental in the growth and development of national institutions around the world. The OHCHR has organized international meetings and supported technical assistance designed to strengthen the capacity of national institutions to realize their potential as independent, accessible, and representative institutions in conformity with the Paris Principles. In the Network's founding statement, members called upon the UN to provide the assistance and financial support necessary to firmly establish and contribute to the future work of the Network of the Americas. The result has been an increasing level of support by the OHCHR for new activities.

The Network is becoming highly active and has plans for a wide variety of capacity-building activities in the coming years. The following represents a summary of the Networks achievements and planned activities.

Summary of Major Network Achievements to Date:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • November 2000: Meeting of national institutions of the Americas in Mexico City. Participants call for the creation of the "Network of the Americas."
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • November 2001: Meeting of a working group in Toronto, Canada to finalize a set of draft Statutes to be presented at the First General Assembly.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • March 2002: First General Assembly of the Network & Workshop on Indigenous Rights held in Kingston, Jamaica – Adoption of Network Statutes and Strategic Framework
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • March 2003: Second Annual General Assembly of the Network & Workshop on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities held in San Jose, Costa Rica – Adoption of 2003/4 Work Plan and Funding Strategy.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • September 2003: Seminar on Human Rights and National Security Legislation held in Cartagena, Colombia.
Scheduled Events:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • March 2004: Workshop on Investigating Complaints of Racial Discrimination made by Indigenous Peoples to be held in Mexico.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • June 2004: Third Annual General Assembly of the Network & Workshop on Preventing Torture to be held in Argentina.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • September 2004: Workshop on Alternative Dispute Resolution to be held in Ottawa
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 2005-2006: Various events such as: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Protecting Human Rights Defenders ○ Gender focused Discrimination and Discrimination based on Sexual Orientation ○ Sharing experiences with using early warning systems ○ Relationships between National Institutions and NGOs ○ The Role of National Institutions in Developing National Plans of Action