



International Human Rights Day 2011

10 December

Statement by Mr. Neal Walker
UN Resident Coordinator and UNDP Resident Representative

Honourable Minister for Law, Justice and Parliamentary Affairs, Barrister Shafique Ahmed;

Excellency the Ambassador of Sweden, Ms. Anneli Lindahl Kenny;

Professor Mizanur Rahman, Chairman of the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) and Chair of today's events;

Justice M. Imman Ali, Appellate Division, Supreme Court of Bangladesh;

Mr. Kazi Reazul Hoque, Fulltime Member of the NHRC;

Professor Niru Kumar Chakma, Honorary Member of NHRC;

Human rights defenders, friends, and colleagues

Thank you for coming to this event today! My introductory comments are more than just a courtesy. The respect for human rights in any country begins with dialogue between citizens, human rights activists, experts and government. By the presence of all of us here today and the frank and open dialogue it brings, we all know that we are moving in the right direction to strengthen human rights in Bangladesh. I would like to particularly appreciate the presence of the Honorable Minister of Law and Justice, because the presence and support of Government is crucial, and his participation today is clear evidence of the strong commitment of this government to the full respect for Human Rights.

With those comments, please now allow me to thank you all for coming to this important event. I am pleased, and honored, to join you today on the occasion of International Human Rights Day -- a day we dedicate to defending freedoms and protections for all people.

Human rights are the foundation of freedom, peace, development and justice -- and human rights are right at the heart of the work of the United Nations does, around the world as well as in Bangladesh. Yes, the world celebrates 10 December as Human Rights Day, when we remember the creation of the Universal Declaration on Human Rights, 63 years ago. The fundamental principle of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights is clear: *All human beings are born free and equal in dignity, and respect for their human rights is fundamental to social harmony and the development of a country.*

The UN has called 2011 “an extraordinary year for human rights”. It seems to me that human rights activism has never been more vital, more alive, than it has been this year. As one example, millions of people in the Middle East and North Africa took to the streets and demanded change. Young people, aided by their sense of fairness, justice and yes, even by their mobile phones, set out to claim their human rights and democratic freedoms.

Many found their voices using the internet and mobile phones to inform, inspire and mobilize supporters to seek their basic human rights of freedom of speech and the right to choose their representatives. Through the transforming power of social media, ordinary people, especially young people, have become human rights activists.

So, partially in response to the role of youth in these transformational global events, this year’s theme for human rights day is “working together to promote human rights: giving young people a voice”. This global theme is incredibly well suited to Bangladesh, where around 70% of the population is under the age of thirty.

Imagine! 70% of the population in Bangladesh is under 30 years old! Our focus on bringing the concepts of human rights to this incredibly young and dynamic population is right on target. It is imperative that the youth of Bangladesh, the future leaders, well understand their human rights. A recent survey done by the NHRC documented that over half the people in the country, have never heard of “human rights.” Even among the 49% that had heard of human rights, one in five could not say what it means. At the same time, we recognize in the history and culture of Bangladesh, an intuitive grasp of these issues, reflected as tolerance, understanding and respect for others. Now, far more explicitly, we hope to encourage not only understanding and respect for the principles of human rights, but to strengthen the will to see those rights secured, in law, through law and order, for themselves and for all fellow citizens.

For these very reasons, we are so pleased to have the Honorable Minister of Law and Justice with us here today, and we wholeheartedly support the National Human Rights Commission’s call to give youth a voice, to empower them to play an even greater role in spreading the message of human rights for all. The youth of Bangladesh need and deserve the support of the Commission, the support of human rights defenders, the support and protection of their government.

On a different note, I would like to take a moment to also **recognize the achievements of this “young” Human Rights Commission.** If I am not mistaken, the Commission was only established in June of 2010, with barely more than a year of operation under its belt. In that short time, the Commission has been accredited (with “B” status) by the International Coordinating Committee and it has been accepted as a (associate) member of the Asia Pacific Forum. These are significant and laudable achievements for a Commission so young.

There are other important achievements. The Commission has been successful at facilitation of policy dialogue and has contributed in several areas, including recommendations on human trafficking legislation, revisions to the Child Act and we have heard excellent details from Justice Imman Ali, in his earlier speech. The Commission has also contributed to the National Women’s Policy, and to the revision of the Bangladesh Constitution. This excellent work on a broad range of relevant subjects clearly demonstrates the value added of a National Human Rights Commission.

We also congratulate the NHRC on the completion of its strategic plan for the next five years and for carrying out a groundbreaking survey on human rights in Bangladesh. I have already mentioned some of the results of that report, earlier, and I do not wish to enter into too much detail. Nevertheless, it is a major achievement, the first of its kind in the country and I would suggest that, in fact, very few countries in the world have done anything similar. The survey is focused on people's perceptions and attitudes toward human rights, and it is quite unique breadth and in the range of human rights issues considered. The results of this study reveal some important and interesting information about attitudes toward human rights in Bangladesh, including, as I mentioned, that more than half of the respondents had never even heard of the concept of human rights!

So, there is work to be done, and this maybe one area where the Commission can target its awareness building efforts -- not only to educate about specific human rights, but how they are protected and whom they can rely upon to act on their behalf.

Towards these ends, and for the Commission to maintain positive momentum, it is important that it receives sufficient financial resources and the required level of staffing. As the Commission grows and expands its presence to the district level, it will need more personnel to handle complaints, conduct awareness raising activities, and engage effectively in policy advocacy.

On another note, I would like to mention that 2012 will be an especially important year for Bangladesh as it prepares for its second Universal Periodic Review that will be coming up in 2013. All in all 42 recommendations were made by the first UPR and the Human Rights Council, requiring a range of legislative and policy responses. A lot of work remains to be done to implement those recommendations before the next review in 2013 but I think it is worth noting that the Government has already made some significant progress toward fulfilling its human rights commitments. Concrete examples include the ratification of the Migrant Workers' Convention and advancement of women and child rights.

As I come to the end of my intervention, please allow me mention one or two policy issues that are worthy of further consideration as that next UPR review approaches. But before I provide the details, let me highlight that these issues to be addressed are not defined by external actors. Rather, they come from inside Bangladesh, from committed members of government, from human rights activists and from students, like you, here in the audience today, and from the National Human Rights Commission, supporting our event today. In other words, these are YOUR areas for action:

- Adoption of the Optional Protocol to the Convention against Torture;
- Amendment to the Evidence Act to allow for a shift from confessions based evidence on ex. allegations of torture to admissibility of scientific evidence;
- Participation in the Special Procedures mechanisms of the Human Rights Council, especially in areas relating to the issue of discrimination of women in law and practice;
- Steady implementation of the Chittagong Peace Accords, and I am pleased to note a series of events and dialogue around these issues have taken place in the past week;

- Amendments to the outdated 1861 Police Act to underpin more effective and accountable law enforcement. Again, I'm pleased to note that the Inspector General of the Police is fully supportive and hopes for the proposed changes to come quickly; and
- Independent investigations of allegations of extra-judicial killing by security forces by an independent and credible body.

It is clear that the expertise and resources of the Commission will be of great value for the government in the implementation of agreed recommendations from the Universal Periodic Review as well as preparation for the 2013 review.

In concluding, I would like to state that the United Nations family in Bangladesh is extremely proud to partner with the Commission to improve the protection and promotion of human rights. We look forward to supporting the Commission as it continues to grow and take its mission to the public.

Finally, I would also like to recognize other development partners including the Swedish, Danish and Swiss Governments for their foresight and generous funding to support the Commission in its challenging but vital mandate to protect and promote human rights in this country.

I would like to thank the Commission for providing me with the honor and the opportunity to speak on this important and inspiring day.

Thank you.