

EU Annual NGO Forum on Human Rights
Statement delivered by the Secretary of State for European Affairs
Lisbon, 6 December 2007

Ladies and gentlemen, distinguished guests,

It is a real pleasure for me to welcome you to Lisbon for this 9th EU NGO Forum on Human Rights. This forum is a unique opportunity for civil society, the EU institutions and governments to exchange views on the EU's human rights policy, and we are pleased to have you all here to contribute to what I am sure will be a very positive outcome.

Your presence here in Lisbon shows your commitment to the cause of human rights. Let me stress that I firmly believe that although promoting and protecting human rights is an unending task for Governments, tackling human rights issues should not be the exclusive prerogative of the State. Civil Society and NGOs have a decisive role to play. This is a lesson we know well, from the times when the Portuguese diplomacy was fighting for the self-determination of East Timor. I am therefore sure that you will provide valuable input to the debates.

This brings us back to the NGO Forum. This Forum is organised by the Portuguese EU Presidency in cooperation with the European Commission, and I would like to thank all for their valuable contributions. The first of these Forums was held nine years ago and its objective remains unchanged: it is a platform for discussing EU human rights policies. Within the EU, we consider that Human Rights policies and priorities are set in order to be known by and shared with civil society in a spirit of openness and frankness. We are also eager to receive feed-back on how EU objectives have in fact been realised on the ground and are perceived by other stakeholders.

Ladies and gentlemen,

In this spirit, let me now turn in more detail to the themes of this forum. It is a special honour for me, and many of you who follow these matters more closely, to bring a special emphasis of this Forum to Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. Previous sessions have focussed on many themes that we might classify as civil and political rights, but the Portuguese Presidency has decided to give this forum an innovative focus. Portugal is profoundly

committed to deepening the protection of economic, social and cultural rights, and has spared no efforts in the last decade to give greater attention to them. In this sense, your reflections on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights will certainly be most helpful for our EU human rights policies.

So the present session will focus on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights in European Union Policies. That is because these issues have a direct impact on people's lives. The fact is that implementing all human rights, be they civil, cultural, economic, political or social, is still very much a work in progress everywhere. The principles of universality, indivisibility, interdependence and interrelatedness of all human rights may be firmly established, but they have yet to be effectively implemented.

The truth is that although we have made considerable progress in addressing problems of human deprivation, many people still live in poverty and suffer from hunger and malnutrition, illiteracy and chronic disease, lack of drinking water and sanitation. In this regard, the EU will continue to firmly support all UN instruments, especially Human Rights Council mandates and all relevant special procedures, with a view to achieving the enjoyment by all individuals of their human rights and fundamental freedoms.

Ladies and gentlemen,

I would now like to welcome some special guests who have joined us today. First, let me thank the Chair of the Sub Committee on Human Rights, Mrs **Hélène Flautre**, for being with us. While dealing with the protection and promotion of ESCR, our special guests will also try to make the link between the main topic of this forum and children's rights, which is one of the priorities of the German and Portuguese Presidencies. Another guest I would like to thank for joining us despite his busy schedule is Professor **Paulo Sergio Pinheiro**, who will address the question of protecting children from violence as a way of promoting their economic social and cultural rights. Mrs **Maud Buquicchio**, your work in promoting human rights and specially children's rights in the Council of Europe is undeniable. I am sure that you will all provide valuable input to the forum.

Let me turn now to the debates of this forum. The **first workshop** will deal with Human Rights Defenders and the promotion of Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. As you well know, one of the EU's priorities has always been the protection of Human Rights Defenders. That is because we consider their work invaluable to further the cause of Human Rights worldwide. Every government should ensure that human rights defenders

are able to operate in safety and without fear of harassment, although the reality indicates otherwise, as we continue to witness attacks on them around the world.

This has been one of the issues where the EU has been more proactive, and we will continue to make use of our Guidelines on Human Rights Defenders, adopted in 2004, to raise awareness to the importance of their efforts, aiming at creating an environment where Human Rights Defenders can operate freely and in safety. If there is a single human rights worker suffering from abuse, it means that an unknown number of people will be at an ever-greater risk of suffering the same dire treatment.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Let me now pay special tribute to someone who cannot be with us today: the Special Representative of the Secretary General on Human Rights Defenders, **Mrs Hina Jilani**, whose work on behalf of all those who are defending human rights is greatly respected by the European Union. She is herself a Human Rights Defender and, as recent events in her own country have shown, she may be in need of the same degree of attention from the international community as the less well-known defenders that she protects within her mandate and who often work in difficult and dangerous situations.

In this Forum's context, the EU would like to focus on one very special category of Human Rights Defenders: those who work in promoting Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. They are very often environmental activists, trade unionists, activists for land or education or health rights, to name just a few, but all these Human Rights Defenders suffer the same abuses as the Defenders of Civil and Political Human Rights. The main difference, according to the reports of the Special Representative, Hina Jilani, is that their efforts are seldom recognised by the International Community and therefore lack the same degree of protection, and their claims are rarely addressed and often ignored.

The **second workshop**, in line with the implementation of the Millennium Development Goals, will deal the realisation of child rights and the participation of children in the eradication of poverty. We cannot eradicate poverty without first realising child rights: the right to education and to food during childhood will certainly create better conditions for the realisation of all rights from both sets: civil and political as well as economic, social and cultural rights.

The **third workshop** will seek to identify indicators and benchmarks so that we can measure progress in the realisation of ESCR. One of the objectives here is to discuss how to measure progress in the promotion of human rights in general, and economic, social and cultural rights in particular. Since the realisation of ESCR is a step-by-step process, are there any universal indicators we can identify? And are the indicators for human development different from those for human rights? These are some of the questions that will contribute to a discussion in this workshop.

Ladies and gentlemen,

The Portuguese EU Presidency is now nearing its end and this has been a challenging year for the EU. We are engaged in various human rights dialogues and consultations as they make a valuable contribution towards strengthening the coherence and consistency of our Human Rights policy. In this context, I would like to underline our full commitment to the Human Rights Dialogues with China, Russia and the newly upgraded dialogue with Turkmenistan in the context of our future dialogue with Central Asia. All of these are aimed at bringing practical improvements in the human rights situation in those countries.

In multilateral fora, we have worked hard to successfully negotiate and adopt a UN resolution on the Moratorium on the use of Death Penalty, after months of uncertainty and unremitting consultations with both EU Member States and other relevant regional actors. The EU considers that the abolition of the death penalty, no matter what the circumstances, contributes to the enhancement of human dignity and the progressive development of human rights, and this result is therefore a very positive step towards this aim.

Another important achievement for the EU is the recent appointment of the Special Representative of the Secretary General on Violence against Children. In this regard, we welcome the Secretary-General's Study on Violence against Children, and also the valuable work of our guest, Professor Paulo Sérgio Pinheiro, whom we shall be hearing in a few moments.

Finally, I am fully convinced that at the end of our debates, some progress will have been achieved through the fruitful discussions of the next two days. With that prospect, I wish you a very successful seminar.

Thank you