

Remarks by Richard Bennett
Representative of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights in Nepal
At an inauguration of *Human Rights National Magna Meet 2009*
Kathmandu, 8 December 2009

Honourable President Dr Ram Baran Yadav, Honourable chairperson of National Human Rights Commission, coordinator of Human Rights National Magna Meet-2009, Mr Charan Prasain, members of human rights community, friends from media, ladies and gentlemen.

My thanks to the organisers of the Magna-Meet for inviting me to join all of our friends in the human rights community at this important and momentous event.

'Embrace Diversity, End Discrimination' is the theme for the Human Rights Day this year, designated by the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights. The High Commissioner, Navi Pillay, has chosen non-discrimination as the theme because discrimination spreads mistrust and humiliation for victims and leads to violence, conflict and discord generally. The main objective is to promote discrimination-free societies and the High Commissioner is calling on every country to embrace diversity and honour the human rights of everyone. By embracing diversity, societies become richer, more respectful, and more human.

I appreciate the effort by human rights community in Nepal to launch this joint campaign for human rights in order to have an inclusive, federal and democratic constitution.

On such an occasion I would also like to recognise and pay tribute to the work done by human rights defenders across Nepal, and particular those who are operating far from Kathmandu at the grassroots level. These defenders are the front line of human rights protection, facing significant challenges, often with few protections of their own. In the past year we have seen a number of incidents where human rights defenders and journalists have been subjected to threats, intimidation and worse, both by state and non-state actors. The High Commissioner stressed at the conclusion of her March 2009 visit to Nepal that she "urge[s] the Government to take concrete steps to ensure the security of human rights defenders, including journalists, who are the first line in defence of the human rights of all Nepalis" and the notable lack of progress on this issue remains a matter for urgent government attention.

In this regard, we hope that the government will soon issue an invitation to the Special Rapporteur on Human Rights Defenders to visit Nepal. Successive Rapporteurs have been requesting to visit Nepal since 2003 - the latest request in June this year - but has yet to receive an invitation from the government.

Civil society's role in standing up for human rights was of course hugely important and influential during *Jana Andolan* and in the establishment of the peace process in Nepal. At that time there was a level of focus, coordination and direct engagement that demonstrated the full potential of civil society to promote change in Nepal. It is vital that civil society again plays this role to ensure that the peace process remains on track, and I would encourage you all to rekindle that spirit and work in unison again to achieve vital human rights goals – which must lie at the heart of the peace process – and ensure that Nepal does not lose the gains that were made at that time.

With this in mind, I would also encourage all elements of civil society to actively engage in the constitution making process and to make their views known on what they want to see in relation to human rights in the constitution. OHCHR-Nepal is pleased to be invited to continue to contribute to this process and to the strengthening of human rights in Nepal.

Thank you.