

For the International Day for the Right to the Truth – 24 March 2011

Pillay: Fight impunity by protecting the right to the truth about gross human rights violations

Statement by the High Commissioner for Human Rights Navi Pillay on the International Day for the Right to the Truth concerning Gross Human Rights Violations and for the Dignity of Victims

Forty-two thousand six hundred and thirty-three -- this is the number of cases, of people who have disappeared and remain unaccounted for over the past 31 years, under consideration by the Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances. Figures also show that new cases continue to emerge from all regions of the world on a regular basis. For every one of those individuals, there are many loved ones agonising over their fate, alternating between hope and despair and waiting for news – any news.

Victims of gross violations of human rights and their families have the inalienable right to know the truth about past events concerning the perpetration of heinous crimes against them. They have the right to know about the circumstances and reasons that led, through massive or systematic violations, to the perpetration of those crimes. They have the right to know who the perpetrators are, and the fate and whereabouts of the victims. In recognition of the right of all these victims, the United Nations has declared today to be the International Day for the Right to the Truth concerning Gross Human Rights Violations and for the Dignity of Victims.

A people’s knowledge of the history of its oppression is part of its heritage. Knowing the truth allows victims and relatives to gain a sense of closure, some restoration of dignity and receive acknowledgement of their suffering. The truth is a tool to combat impunity. It is a tool for justice. And it is a vital step in preventing a recurrence of the events that led to the violations.

It is for these reason that it is so important to bring the truth to light, including through public, independent and impartial inquiries into gross violations such as torture, rape, sexual slavery, disappearances and killings that we are currently witnessing in so many countries. In recent years, my office has supported a number of fact-finding missions and commissions of inquiry into reports of gross violations in a number of countries, including the one on Libya, which was created by the Human Rights Council last month.

In marking this day, we also pay tribute to the brave women and men who have taken, and continue to take, great risks to ensure that the truth is told about human rights violations in their countries. These human rights defenders often fear reprisals but nevertheless discharge what they perceive as their duty with great courage. Many have been arrested or face worrying

and alarming incitement to violence due to their cooperation with international human rights mechanisms, including my office.

Indeed this date was chosen to commemorate one such human rights defender, Monsignor Óscar Arnulfo Romero, who was shot dead in 1980 while celebrating mass in a chapel in El Salvador. Monsignor Romero was killed for his outspoken condemnation of the violations being committed against the most vulnerable populations in his country.

On this day, I call on all states to take all appropriate measures to give effect to the right to the truth, the right to justice and the right to reparations.

These three indispensable rights are at the core of the fight against impunity and the restoration of the dignity of victims. Let this international day be a reminder of the existence and the importance of the right to the truth. Let it also be a reminder of the need to protect those who dedicate their lives to telling it.

ENDS

Learn more about the International Day for the Right to the Truth concerning Gross Human Rights Violations and for the Dignity of Victims:

<http://www.un.org/en/events/righttotruthday/>

Learn more about the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Navi Pillay:

<http://www.ohchr.org/EN/AboutUs/Pages/HighCommissioner.aspx>