



Office of the Special Coordinator
for Lebanon

Bureau du Coordinateur Spécial
pour le Liban

**United Nations Special Coordinator for Lebanon Michael Williams
Speech at the UN-Parliament Conference to Commemorate Human
Rights Day
Beirut, Lebanon**

Monday, 14 December 2009

MP Michel Moussa, Chairman of the Human Rights Committee in Parliament, distinguished Members of Parliament, representatives of civil society and the diplomatic community, ladies and gentlemen. It is a great pleasure for me to be here.

Let me start today by thanking Speaker Berri, whom I will be meeting in an hour or so, Chairman Moussa and the members of the Human Rights Committee for hosting this event to commemorate the anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. This event symbolizes the strong collaboration between the UN and Lebanon, as well as the UN's ambition to support efforts aimed at strengthening the institutions of the State.

It is now universally recognized that the adoption and implementation of human rights standards cement the political and institutional foundation of the State, enhance its legitimacy and shapes its obligations towards its community. In this respect, Parliament has a strategic role in this process of state building, especially in a country as diverse as Lebanon.

Allow me to pay tribute to the many representatives of the NGO community, of the civil society organizations who are present here today and also recognize their commitment. Not the least during the consultations with the Human Rights Committee on the first National Action for Plan for human rights.

The Action Plan has been at the core of the Committee's work for two years. The offices of the High Commissioner for Human Rights and UNDP have been your partners in this important endeavour.

I know too, as you have said Mr. Chairman, that the Parliamentary Committee is determined to complete this work and build on the Action Plan as a platform for strengthening Lebanon's human rights regime.

In only a few weeks, Lebanon will take a seat as an elected member of the Security Council of the United Nations. This is a great opportunity for your country. But like all opportunities, it comes with greater scrutiny and responsibilities. Lebanon has adopted most of the international treaties and covenants with regards to Human Rights. It has, to some extent, already set the bar high for other countries in the region to follow. But naturally, as Representative of the Secretary General, I am anxious to see more done to ensure that the provisions of all these fundamental international instruments are fully applied, respected and reported on. And I hope that in the near future, Lebanon can be a party to the Ottawa Treaty on banning landmines after it became last year a party to the Oslo Treaty on banning cluster bombs.

A country built on diversity and openness such as Lebanon cannot ignore for example discrimination that still affects women and their role in society.

The living conditions of refugees is also an issue we urge you to review by applying your moral compass and your innate political foresight. The solution of the predicament of the Palestinian community in Lebanon requires a comprehensive and lasting regional peace agreement. We remain guided by existing Security Council resolutions such as 242 and 338 which protect the right of return of Palestinian refugees.

In the meantime however, we cannot ignore the impact that poverty, hopelessness, and lack of opportunity have on countless thousands of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon's camps, and especially the young. The crisis two years ago in Nahr el Bared and the constant tension that underlines life in the camps are a powerful example of the negative repercussions that lack of basic rights can have.

The same applies to other refugees. At present, most non-Palestinian refugees are considered illegal and are subject to arrest, detention and deportation in some cases. While the authorities have shown greater flexibility in a number of cases, we still have refugees recognized by UNHCR who have spent months (and in some cases years) in detention for the sole reason of their illegal entry or stay.

Many Iraqis have escaped out of fear for their lives in the midst of the violence that has gripped their country in recent years. Lebanese have a sense of empathy for the predicament of fellow Arabs who are forced to leave their country at times of civil strife and conflict.

I believe we can possibly work together to find a solution to this through amending the 1962 law to include the principle of non-detention, non-arrest and non deportation of refugees for illegal entry. The advantage of such an amendment is that it would leave UNHCR with the responsibility to assist them and to find long-term solutions for them outside of Lebanon.

Finally, Mr Chairman, let me close by making another suggestion. The UN has worked with as many as a hundred governments, more than half the members of the United Nations, to assist them in the establishment of independent national human rights commissions. These institutions have proven invaluable in strengthening the rule of law, protecting the rights of individuals, and enhancing the accountability of governments before their own citizens. I know that both the Parliamentary Committee and civil society organizations have been considering a national human rights institution. Let me just say that we are ready to provide any technical assistance you may require from us to turn this idea into a success.

I am confident, Mr. Chairman, that your committee, with our support, support of Parliamentarians and the Human Rights community in Lebanon and NGOs, has a great future and one which will see a strengthened human rights regime in Lebanon.

Thank you very much.

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