

International Service for Human Rights  
Reception



Address by

Ms. Navi Pillay  
United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights

Geneva, 14 March, 2013

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I should first like to thank the International Service for Human Rights for inviting me to join you here today.

I welcome this opportunity to reflect on the Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action, 20 years on, and to highlight this special issue of the Service's Human Rights Monitor Quarterly, which provides insight and inspiration from many human rights experts and practitioners.

I should like to take this opportunity to congratulate Phil Lynch on his appointment as Director of the International Service for Human Rights. This is an organization that provides invaluable contributions to the support of human rights defenders around the world, and I am pleased to say that my Office has enjoyed a close working relationship with the Service for many years. I am sure that, with Phil's leadership, this collaboration will continue to develop, perhaps also extending to new areas.

Looking back to Vienna now, as High Commissioner for Human Rights, I must pay tribute to the pivotal role of civil society in Vienna in advocating for the establishment of the position of the High Commissioner for Human Rights in 1993. I continue to count on civil society's daily engagement with my Office, whether at Headquarters or in the field, and value their vigorous defence of my Office's independence.

Like some of you here today, I myself was present in Vienna 20 years ago as an NGO representative. At that time, I felt that the Conference was remarkable in recognizing the fundamental importance of civil society and human rights activists. For many civil society actors, this was a landmark of great significance. Since then, civil society's work has vastly increased public awareness of human rights issues and the promotion and protection of all human rights and fundamental freedoms for all.

This emphasis on inclusion and universality at Vienna paved the way to a new appreciation of issues, such as a new emphasis on violence against women as a human rights violation. By declaring that gender-based violence, sexual harassment, exploitation and trafficking are incompatible with the dignity and worth of the human person, Vienna led us to a new understanding of human rights and accountability.

This newly strengthened relationship with civil society actors, which began in Vienna, also gave new recognition to discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity. Twenty years ago the human rights of LGBT people were rarely discussed. Today — although we are still “in the process of educating ourselves”, as I said last year at the Human Rights Council — I think we have covered some very significant ground. This was achieved in large part because of the persevering advocacy of civil society, and because my Office also prioritised this issue. It is in my view a vibrant example of how we can get the most out of our complementary roles.

It was also at Vienna that we paved the way to the Declaration on human rights defenders. This milestone discussion was a vital step towards recognizing the importance and legitimacy of the work of human rights defenders in the field, as well as the need to better protect them when they are at risk.

This remains a compelling priority, both for my Office and for the ISHR. Human rights defenders often face brutal reprisals, and women human rights defenders in particular

face specific threats, because in many parts of the world, standing up and speaking out defies gender norms that prescribe women's passivity.

My Office has a special responsibility to defend human rights defenders, including women human rights defenders. In this endeavour, I count on our strong partnership with many others: the UN family, Member States, civil society actors, regional organizations and national human rights institutions – in addition to the various human rights mechanisms and independent experts.

The Human Rights Council has played a forceful role in support of human rights defenders, and I am encouraged by the tabling of a new resolution on human rights defenders at the Council's current session. This is aimed at further strengthening protection for human rights defenders at the international level.

I also welcome and share the forceful approach taken by the ISHR regarding reprisals in general, and specifically with regard to the Secretary-General's report on reprisals.

One of the provisions of the Declaration on human rights defenders, which is frequently overlooked, is article 7: everyone has the right to develop and discuss new human rights ideas and to advocate their acceptance.

And indeed, we have made some progress in bringing on the human rights agenda issues that were on almost nobody's lips 20 years ago. This remains one of the major contributions of civil society: pushing the frontiers of human rights to give real meaning to the values and notions of inclusion and universality. New human rights ideas and approaches bring oxygen to the system and keep it alive and alert to the many human rights challenges we face today.

Thank you for your continuing support. I look forward to our continuing partnership.