

BRING HUMAN RIGHTS HOME
Public Rally for Housing as a Human Right
Chicago, USA
International Human Rights Day, 10 December 2004

Solidarity Statement by Mr. Miloon Kothari, Special Rapporteur on Adequate Housing
UN Commission on Human Rights

On International human rights day I welcome the opportunity to send this solidarity message to participants at the 'Bring Human Rights Home' public rally in Chicago. This rally signifies an important milestone in the struggle for the recognition of housing as a human right in the United States.

The rally also marks the tragic reality in which low-income citizens of Chicago are seeing their homes and dreams disappear under the so-called 'transformation plan' of the City of Chicago. What we are witnessing in Chicago today is occurring all across the United States, and in fact, across the world. Governments are dismantling social housing, housing subsidies and affirmative actions for low-income people in the name of liberalization and are placing primacy in the market and privatization as panacea to solve the global crisis of millions living in inadequate and insecure housing. The US has been the main 'ideologue' behind these policy directives that are increasingly reflected in housing policies and legislations of countries across the world. Such policies are a clear violation of the commitment of States across the world to International human rights instruments.

Chicago today, like many cities across the United States, is in the middle of a housing rights crisis. The facts speak for themselves - 14,000 units of public housing demolished with less than 1,000 replacement units built... more than 20,000 public housing residents displaced by the 'Transformation Plan'. The United Nations has consistently reaffirmed that forced evictions are a 'gross violation of human rights, especially the right to adequate housing. The UN Commission on Human Rights unanimously adopted resolution 1993/77 entitled 'Forced Evictions'. This resolution, that the United States voted for, called upon states to "confer legal security of tenure to all persons currently threatened with eviction and to adopt all necessary measures giving full protection against forced evictions, based upon effective participation, consultation and negotiation with affected persons or groups". The facts as they have unfolded in Chicago since 1993, and elsewhere in the United States, clearly indicate that the stipulations of the resolution have not been followed.

These facts illustrate, tragically, that deliberate policy and legislative measures in the United States continue to undermine advances made in the previous decades to provide affordable housing for the poor. The compelling testimonies that you will hear today point to the failure of state responsibility to protect the right to adequate housing for the poor. This is all the more ironic given that the United States is one of the wealthiest countries, and Chicago one of the wealthiest cities, in the world and yet lacks the will, demonstrated by countries and cities with far fewer resources, to protect one of the most fundamental international human rights, the right to adequate housing, recognized in a range of instruments, including the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (CERD), ratified by the United States. The obligations from CERD, to desist from policies that increase housing segregation, are particularly appropriate since, according to authoritative studies and the Independent Monitor of the Chicago Housing Authority, a large percentage of families were relocated to areas with high poverty and high concentration of African-Americans.

In a global study on women and housing, that I am conducting for the UN Commission on Human Rights, we have found that women are disproportionately affected and face widespread discrimination due to phenomenon such as forced evictions and homelessness. It is vital that as we contemplate actions to halt the ongoing violations of the right to housing in Chicago we insist on protecting the human rights of women. We need to ensure that housing policies and legislation take into account that some groups of women are even more vulnerable to homelessness and other housing rights violations- widows, women-headed households, and women victims of forced evictions. We also need to call upon the United States to ratify the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women.

I would like to particularly acknowledge the invaluable work done by civil society organizations in Chicago, including CPPH, in consistently exposing violations of the right to housing and in monitoring the housing crisis in Chicago. These processes have also been utilized to impart critical human rights education for the victims of these violations so that people know their human rights and can claim them. In the human rights day message today from 35 UN Special Rapporteur we have stated that "We strongly believe that human rights education is an essential tool to address the rising tide of racial discrimination and xenophobia; discrimination that lies beneath the root causes of human rights violations suffered by these groups. Human rights education can constitute an empowering process for those who are marginalized. It is indispensable in bridging the existing protection gap for marginalized groups, who should be fully involved in the design, delivery and evaluation of any educational activity addressing them..."¹ [1]

In my statement² [2] on World Habitat Day, 2004 I called for a global consensus on the human rights approach and for initiatives to be built around "Concerted efforts to build more inclusive cities that halt the ongoing process of fragmentation and 'urban apartheid'. This should be accompanied by legal and policy measures that guarantee people's rights to information and participation in the planning process."

In this context, I urge public officials to rethink their plans regarding the housing future of Chicago based on close consultation with people of all incomes and consistent with the international human rights obligations of the United States

I support the efforts of the organizers and participants at the 'Bringing Human Rights Home' rally. Your valiant struggle is based on the moral, legal and ethical basis of human rights that flows from the inherent dignity of individuals and the recognition of non-discrimination and equality as cornerstone principles. Today, on International Human Rights Day, let us join together to work towards the full realization of human rights for all. I wish you well in your deliberations and prayers and commit the strength of my UN mandate to assist you in your just struggle.

¹[1] For the full text of the statement see:

<http://www.unhcr.ch/hurricane/hurricane.nsf/view01/0131163454A52BF0C1256F6500577634?opendocument>

²[2] For the text of the statement and other documents from the Special Rapporteur see:

www.ohchr.org/english/issues/housing/index.htm