

Mr. Vice-President,
Members of the Government,
Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

I would like to thank the Government for inviting me to Colombia, and for giving me the opportunity to formalize with you the continuation of our long-standing relationship.

I am delighted that we have renewed the agreement that established OHCHR's presence in Colombia with an integral mandate of observation, legal advice, technical cooperation and dissemination for three additional years, until 30 October 2010. This comprehensive mandate gives us a clearly defined roadmap to continue to support the government's efforts in promoting and protecting human rights.

The discussions I have entertained during my visit, including in my meeting with the President, confirmed the strong commitment of Colombians to continue improving the human rights situation.

I was greatly encouraged by the words of appreciation for the work of my Office expressed by the President and by his reaffirmation that human rights constitute one of the fundamental pillars of his political agenda and of Colombian democracy.

The many officials I met stressed the advances that have been made since my last visit to Colombia in 2005, while candidly acknowledging the challenges and pitfalls that confront them daily.

Ladies, Gentlemen,

This year, OHCHR celebrates the 10th anniversary of its presence in Colombia.

We are in the process of evaluating our work, and we are committed to doing so in a transparent and inclusive fashion.

I am very impressed by the dedication of Colombian civil society. I commend, in particular, the courageous efforts of human rights defenders and organizations, as well as the victims' movement, who at considerable personal risk advocate for the improvement of the overall human rights situation in Colombia and make a real difference in the day-to-day life of many of their fellow citizens.

I also want to take this opportunity to reiterate my support to all victims of human rights

violations, and to the members of their families, including victims of extrajudicial executions, enforced disappearances, kidnapping, and arbitrary detention, as well as to victims of landmines. I also wish to signal the plight of IDPs and support unequivocally their right of return.

As I pointed out in my report for this year, in order to foster lasting reconciliation, all parties in Colombia must commit to building a peace framework that is deeply anchored in human rights and international humanitarian law. I hope that progress will be made in the negotiations between the Government and the illegal armed groups in order to overcome the armed conflict, and I stress that a high priority must be given to human rights, humanitarian law and victims' rights in these dialogues

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The demobilization process now underway in Colombia is an important step forward, and is reflected by the decreasing number of violations committed by paramilitaries last year. However, this process still faces important challenges. I am particularly concerned about the fulfillment of the victims' rights to truth, justice and reparation. I encourage the Government to apply an effective policy for the complete eradication of paramilitarism, that is, a policy that dismantles all political and economic structures held by demobilized paramilitary groups. Such policy should also aim to put an end to all illegal activities of those paramilitaries that did not demobilize, as well as of those of new illegal armed groups that arose after the demobilization process had begun.

I was deeply encouraged by the commitment of the judiciary to continue its investigations and punishment of civil servants with links to illegal armed groups. These processes must ensure the full respect of procedural guarantees, as well as the safety of those victims and witnesses who courageously have stepped forward to assert their right to truth, justice and reparation.

I welcome the changes proposed by the President to the Military Criminal Code, and I hope that Congress will approve these modifications. Likewise, I warmly welcome the issuance of Directive 10 by the Ministry of Defense which reemphasizes the obligation of law enforcement authorities to respect the rights of protected persons, and cites the creation of a committee seeking to eradicate human rights violations by members of State security forces. These encouraging efforts bring hope for a definitive end to extrajudicial executions.

I also wish to call on all illegal armed groups to give up the unacceptable practice of kidnapping, and to free immediately and unconditionally, all persons held as hostages. While

I was relieved to learn that the bodies of the representatives from the department of Valle will soon be returned to their families, I exhort the members of the FARC-EP to hand over all bodies of civil and military personnel who were either assassinated or who died in captivity.

Excellencies,

In a few weeks Colombia will enter into the final phase of local elections. I hope these elections take place in a peaceful and lawful manner, and without any interference from illegal armed groups. Full respect of political rights is an indispensable precondition for both fair elections and a functioning democracy.

Sustained efforts have been made to strengthen the rule of law, in particular through the investigations carried out by the Supreme Court and the Attorney General's Office. Respect for the rule of law and a strengthening of institutions will allow the country to deepen and expand its democracy and ultimately, to change the lives of millions of Colombian men and women in situations of vulnerability.

One of my main objectives in Latin America is to work toward the fulfillment of economic, social, and cultural rights. The right to work, to food, to education, to form unions and gather freely, to have access to adequate housing and health care are intrinsic to everyone's welfare.

Participation of all in promoting the rights of all is the basis of one of OHCHR's recommendations this year. This calls for a National Action Plan on Human Rights and International Humanitarian Law drawn up with a broad participation of Government authorities and civil society actors at the national, regional and local levels. I congratulate Colombia for its commitment to the Action Plan, and I trust that the joint efforts of Government and civil society will be reflected soon in a long term Plan that contributes to strengthening the rule of law.

All sectors of society are doing their part in the preparation of the Action Plan, but I want to emphasize the importance of the participation of indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities because of the specific vulnerabilities they face. Not only do they suffer from the impact of armed conflict, but they also live in conditions of extreme poverty. Some communities even face the risk of extinction. I am confident that this Action Plan will contribute to significant advances towards the fulfillment of all their rights, and on an equal basis with the fulfillment of the rights of all Colombians.

In closing I would like to pay homage to all those in Colombia whose unwavering

Statement by Ms. Louise Arbour, United Nations High Commissioner
for Human Rights

commitment to human rights paves the way to a better future for their fellow citizens and inspires victims of human rights abuses all over the world.

If I may be permitted to do so, I also wish to pay tribute to the remarkable work of international and national staff of OHCHR who in the past ten years, have demonstrated their hope and their faith in the future of this country.

Thank you.