

“Papua New Guinea: window of opportunity for human rights” – UN human rights expert

PORT MORESBY / GENEVA (14 March 2014) – “Papua New Guinea is likely to grow and play an increased role at least at the regional level in the near future, and currently has a unique opportunity to ensure that this future society is based on a solid human rights and rule of law foundation,” stated Mr. Christof Heyns, United Nations Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions, at the end of his official visit to Papua New Guinea today. During his twelve-day visit to the country, Mr. Heyns examined the level of unlawful killings in Papua New Guinea, as well as efforts to prevent them and ensure justice and redress in such cases.

“There are high levels of violence in Papua New Guinea. During my visit, I was informed about various types of killings perpetrated in Papua New Guinea, such as killings related to accusations of sorcery or witchcraft, domestic violence, and killings during tribal fighting, but also the lethal consequences of the excessive use of force by the police and sometimes private security forces”, noted the expert. Mr. Heyns also identified impunity as a major source of the continuation of violence.

“At the same time, Papua New Guinea is not only a country very rich in resources, but it has also started to put some of the important cornerstones of a significantly stronger protection of human rights, including the right to life, in place. None of these initiatives, nor any of the additional ones I propose, will on their own make much of a difference, but if they act in concert and strengthen each other there can be major gains,” believes the Special Rapporteur.

Mr. Heyns presented a series of recommendations to strengthen human rights, including the right to life, in Papua New Guinea. Among them are the creation of an efficient national human rights institution, reform of the Police Investigative Unit, creating an enabling environment for the establishment of human rights NGOs, the involvement of the country’s organized legal profession in impact litigation, education on the right to life in primary schools, and the establishment of a country office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights in the country.

The Special Rapporteur cautioned, however, that the death penalty is not the answer to the current level of violence in the country. “I am concerned about the possible resumption of executions in Papua New Guinea which may result in

violations of international law. I understand that the society is looking for ways to curb the violence it is experiencing, but the death penalty in my view provides a false sense of security. More effective policing of violent crime and education are but two of the areas where the focus should lie.”

During his visit, Christof Heyns visited Port Moresby, Buka in the Autonomous Region of Bougainville, Goroka, Kundiawa, Lae, and Manus Island, where he met various officials, diplomats, representatives of the civil society and victims or their relatives. He cautioned that the underlying problems at the Regional Processing Center on Manus Island have not been resolved after the February riots. “This is a highly problematic situation where the asylum seekers receive mixed messages about the question whether they will be relocated in Papua New Guinea if they get refugee status. The situation should be resolved as soon as possible, and there must be transparency as regards the investigations.”

Mr. Heyns will present a comprehensive report on his visit to Papua New Guinea to a forthcoming session of the UN Human Rights Council in 2015, where he will make specific recommendations to strengthen the protection of the right to life in the country.

(*) Check the full end-of-mission statement by the Special Rapporteur: <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=14373&LangID=E>

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The Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions, Christof Heyns (South Africa), is a director of the Institute for International and Comparative Law in Africa and Professor of Human Rights Law at the University of Pretoria, where he has also directed the Centre for Human Rights, and has engaged in wide-reaching initiatives on human rights in Africa. He has advised a number of international, regional and national entities on human rights issues. Learn more, log on to: <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/Issues/Executions/Pages/SRExecutionsIndex.aspx>

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