

Celebrating Human Rights Day 2010 at the UN

In honor of Human Rights Day on December 10, an event was held at the United Nations in Geneva. The theme was “Human Rights Defenders Acting Against Discrimination,” which focused on recognizing, supporting and, most importantly, defending human rights defenders in their work. The program included speakers, performances and human rights defenders who engaged in a panel discussion.

Welcome from the Mayor

The Mayor of Geneva, Sandrine Salerno, opened the event by delivering a welcome speech in which she declared the city’s commitment to work with the federation to provide the best accommodation for the organizations based in Geneva, and its dedication to defending human rights defenders. Salerno had a personal stake in the latter, as she was a long-time campaigner for maternal rights and fought for men and women’s equality before becoming mayor. She expressed her personal opinion that the Human Rights Council could be more effective, as well as her amazement at the “ill will” shown by States both in the North and South in turning law into action. She identified a relapse due to an upsurge in the areas of the prohibition of torture, and the persistence of discrimination based on gender, religion and sexual orientation. She ended her welcoming by pledging her full support to Navi Pillay, the High Commissioner for Human Rights, as long as she remained in office.

Keynote Speech by the High Commissioner

The High Commissioner for Human Rights, Navi Pillay, opened her speech by pointing out that the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights set out a path where the strong are held accountable and the vulnerable are protected. She asserted that it is human rights defenders who struggle to translate the principles enshrined in the Declaration into reality. She called on people to make the fight of human rights defenders their priority and to stand by them, as they are now being arrested, detained and sometimes killed. She said that human rights defenders continue to champion the Declaration through their ideas and actions, and know that silence and inaction embolden those who threaten and violate human rights. Pillay then addressed many pressing human rights issues that defenders so boldly fight to eliminate, namely discrimination against women, indigenous people, migrants, older persons, persons with disabilities and discrimination based on sexuality. The final message in her speech was to governments, who she called on to acknowledge that criticism is not a crime and to release of all human rights defenders.

by Jade Johnston
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