Address presented on behalf of
the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights
Ms. Louise Arbour

6TH CONFERENCE OF AFRICAN NATIONAL HUMAN RIGHTS INSTITUTIONS
“PROTECTING REFUGEES, IDPS AND STATELESS PERSONS”

8 - 10 October 2007, Kigali, Rwanda
Mr. Prime Minister,
Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

I regret not being able to attend the 6th Conference of African National Human Rights Institutions. I am nevertheless pleased that my representative, Mr. Bacre Ndiaye, will address you on my behalf.

I would like to thank the Government of Rwanda for hosting this Conference. The involvement of Rwanda in the adoption of the Pact on Security, Stability and Development in the Great Lakes Region has created new expectations to strengthen the rule of law, promote human rights and combat impunity in the region. During my recent visit, I had the opportunity to witness first hand the many impressive gains made by Rwanda since the 1994 genocide. These include the abolition of capital punishment on 25 July 2007.

I also wish to congratulate our host from the National Commission for Human Rights of Rwanda for organizing this Conference. We welcome the active cooperation of UNHCR, UNDP and our other regional and international partners in this endeavour.

Furthermore, I would like to recognize the important role played by the Coordinating Committee of African National Institutions. Since its creation in 1996 in Yaoundé, Cameroon, the committee has provided a framework for national human rights institutions to work together and cooperate on a regional basis through a wide range of services, including training, capacity building, networking and staff exchanges.

As you know, during this meeting, the leadership of the network of African national human rights institutions will shift from Nigeria to Rwanda. I extend my appreciation for the work done over the past two years by the outgoing Chairpersons of the Coordinating Committee, Mr. Bukhari Bello and Ms. Ajoni of the National Human Rights Commission of Nigeria. Let me also congratulate Ms. Kayitesi Sylvie, the
incoming Chairperson of the National Commission for Human Rights of Rwanda who will preside over the network of African NHRIs for the next two years.

My office is committed to strengthening the network of African National Human Rights Institutions through an effective and independent Secretariat, now set up in Nairobi, Kenya. I also encourage our partners to contribute both financially and technically to building the capacity of the Permanent Secretariat of African NHRIs.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The protection of refugees, internally displaced persons and stateless people must be seen in the broader context of the protection of human rights. That protection is first and foremost a State obligation.

However, given the vast and growing number of refugees, IDPs and stateless persons, no single actor can be expected to meet in full their protection needs. Therefore, it is of vital importance to create synergy and complementarities among State and non-state humanitarian actors involved in protection. Partnerships may typically include a wide range of participants, such as UN mechanisms and agencies, NHRIs and NGOs.

A number of national human rights institutions in Africa are already involved in the protection of refugees, and stateless persons. Those that do not have such a mandate should do their utmost to ensure that they are granted it. Thus, this meeting represents both a unique forum to compare notes and practices, identify gaps, and develop or enhance partnerships, as well as an opportunity to focus on ways to increase and maximize activities in the areas of protection and assistance to refugees, IDPs and stateless persons. It is my firm belief that strengthened cooperation among national human rights institutions, the African Union and its organs, the African Commission on Human and Peoples Rights, Regional and Sub-Regional Organizations, non-governmental organisations, and other institutions with human right and humanitarian agendas will benefit Africa at large.
Excellencies,

The growing number of refugees in Africa led to the adoption of the highly innovative 1969 Organization of African Unity Convention governing the specific aspects of refugee problems in the Continent. Africa is in the process of breaking more new ground with the elaboration of the African Union Convention for the protection and assistance of Internally Displaced Persons in Africa. This regional instrument, when adopted, will become the first international legally binding document on the protection of IDPs in the world.

National human rights institutions in Africa can play an important role in the ongoing discussions concerning this AU Convention, as well as in its future implementation. As for the immediate tasks ahead, you can contribute both by mobilizing support for such instrument and by providing input and expertise to the drafting process and planned discussions to be organized by the AU.

Indeed, the recent examples of the UN Convention on Disability and the Optional Protocol on the Convention Against Torture have shown the benefits of NHRIs’ involvement in conceiving new international legal standards, and in supporting implementation at the national level.

Distinguished Participants,

While matters related to refugees, migrants, and IDPs have been well documented throughout the years and the experience of the international community in dealing with such matters has become considerably more sophisticated, comparatively very little attention has been devoted to the issue of statelessness.

I wish to take this opportunity to highlight that statelessness increasingly appears as a forgotten human rights crisis. According to UNHCR, more than 5 million people lack citizenship or effective nationality all over the world. This is a violation of Article 15 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which holds that every person “has a right to a nationality”. In Africa, statelessness and arbitrary deprivation of nationality may even represent a threat to regional peace and security. Statelessness is often an underlying factor of displacement and refugee flows, not least because it marginalizes
and stigmatizes individuals and often deprives them from access to basic rights. Clearly, this is an area where the contribution of National Human Rights Institutions can make a real difference by stimulating not only an awareness of this long neglected issue, but also—and crucially—much needed action. Your discussions today will undoubtedly help bring this matter into sharper focus.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Let me conclude by wishing you every success in your deliberations today. As always, my Office stands ready to assist you. We look forward to the substantive outcomes and follow-up actions resulting from this Conference.

Thank you.