Mr. Prime Minister of the Republic of Rwanda,
Madam Chairperson of the Rwandan Commission on Human Rights,
Madam Chairperson of the Coordinating Committee of African National Human Rights Institutions,
Distinguished Representatives,
Colleagues, ladies and gentlemen,

I regret very much that I am unable to be with you in person for this 6th Conference of African National Human Rights Institutions (NHRIs). I welcome the focus of the Conference on refugees, internally displaced and stateless persons and would like to take this opportunity to submit a brief written statement in my capacity as the Representative of the UN Secretary-General on the Human Rights of Internally Displaced Persons.

Approximately twelve million people are currently internally displaced within Africa as a result of conflict alone. That is approximately half the number of people internally displaced worldwide. Sudan, Uganda and the Democratic Republic of Congo claim one-quarter of the world’s displaced. Internal displacement is not just a matter of concern for these three countries, however, or the handful of others that receive media attention. Most countries in Africa have experience with displacement – whether they are dealing with conflict; natural disasters; or displacement caused by development projects.

One of the main functions of my mandate is to dialogue with governments, NGOs and other actors to develop recommendations in response to ongoing displacement situations and challenges. One way in which I do this is to undertake country missions. Since taking up my mandate in 2004, I have carried out a number of missions and working visits to this continent, including the Central African Republic, Côte d’Ivoire, Southern Sudan and Uganda. I plan to carry out further missions to Africa in the coming year.
These visits have given me the opportunity to witness and discuss the role that NHRI can play in addressing internal displacement. As I discussed last year with Mr. Bello Bukari, former Executive Secretary of the Nigerian Commission and Chairperson of the Coordinating Committee of African National Human Rights, NHRI can play an active role in protecting the rights of the internally displaced including: monitoring conditions of displacement; following-up on early warnings; educating, training and building capacity of civil society; and working with governments on the development of laws and policies on internal displacement.

Indeed, several NHRI in the region are already undertaking many of these activities. In Uganda, for example, the Commission has been assigned a role under the National Policy for Internally Displaced Persons to monitor the protection of the human rights of the internally displaced and to take part in the Technical Committee responsible for planning and coordination. In Kenya, I am aware that the Commission released a report this year in conjunction with the International Federation on Human Rights on the situation of internal displacement in that country.

I hope that this conference will provide the opportunity not only to share these experiences and strengthen NHRI engagement with internally displaced persons, but to strengthen relationships within the region. In this regard, I was honoured in November 2006 to address the African Commission on Human and Peoples’ Rights and I am happy to report that collaboration is excellent between my office and that of the Commission’s Special Rapporteur on Refugees, Asylum Seekers and Internally Displaced Persons, Mr. Bahame Nyanduga. I encourage all NHRI to facilitate the work of the Special Rapporteur and the Commission by providing to them data and analysis about the human rights protection of internally displaced persons in their country.

What are the human rights of the internally displaced? Unlike refugees who by definition are living in a country which is not their own, most internally displaced persons are citizens of the country they are in and do not lose, as a consequence of their being displaced, the rights provided to the population at large. The Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement which have been recognized by the UN General Assembly as an “important international framework for the protection of internally displaced persons”, set the international minimum standards for the protection of internally displaced persons and provide a framework for identifying protection needs and for planning, implementing and monitoring protection activities.

Rather than imposing new obligations, the Guiding Principles are based on existing international human rights and humanitarian law and have been recognized as authoritative at the international, regional and national levels. In Africa, the Organization of African Unity (now the African Union) formally acknowledged the principles; the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) called on its members to disseminate and apply them; and in the Horn of Africa, the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), in a ministerial declaration, called the principles a “useful tool” in the development of national policies on internal displacement. Indeed, commendable efforts are underway in Africa to enhance the
normative framework for the protection of the internally displaced. I particularly welcome the adoption of the Great Lakes Protocol on the Protection and Assistance to Internally Displaced Persons and the discussions underway in the African Union to adopt a regional Convention on internal displacement.

Next year will mark the 10th anniversary of the *Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement*. Much has been accomplished over the course of this past decade. But much more needs to be done as is evident in the fact that people continue to be displaced on this continent and throughout the world. It is my earnest hope that this 6th Conference of African National Human Rights Institutions will mark a turning point in your engagement with those who have been forced to flee their homes and whose human rights are in urgent need of protection. I will look forward to reading the report of this meeting and to working with you to support your efforts.

Thank you.