Dear colleagues, I am delighted to have the opportunity to speak to you to on this session on a topic which is so much relevant and painful at the same time.

Systematic denial of human rights often lead to violence and conflicts because certain group whose rights are violated will likely to resort to violence to protect their rights. In turn, violent conflicts might also lead to human rights violations such as the loss of life, property and dignity during a war. So, human rights can be both a cause and a consequence of violent conflict. Thus, NHRI play an important role in early warning, conflict prevention and conflict transformation given that their mandate includes human rights promotion, protection and monitoring.

The Public Defender in Georgia has been actively involved in these processes from the very early on. We have been documenting cases of killings and hostage taking of civilians, property destructions, torture and inhumane treatment. During the 2008 war, our institution surveyed internally displaced people and monitored their conditions in collective centers and temporary shelters. Since then, we actively monitor the rights of IDPs and recommend the government on IDP legislation and policy. One of our recent achievements was the exchange of prisoners from Abkhazia, South Ossetia and the rest of Georgia. We put lots of efforts in preparing this process.

We are also actively engaged in confidence building measures and peace building projects with Abkhaz and South Ossetian human rights defenders and civil society activists. In this process we talk about needs and human rights situation of conflict-affected population and search ways to address them. One part of our confidence building work is human rights trainings for conflict-affected youth and activists from both sides of division line, bringing together people of different age, ethnic and professional background to discuss the concept of human rights, tolerance, issue of non-discrimination, mechanisms of human rights protection and so on.

Yet, there are various challenges that we face in our work ranging from the physical access to conflict regions to political stalemates. In conflict and post-conflict settings even insignificant issues easily get politicized, activists are often labeled, dissent voices are silenced and the best initiatives are ignored due to mistrust between parties. In this kind of environment, we as an Ombudsman’s Office are handicapped to operate with our full potential in support of population of occupied regions.

On the other hand, it is important that our institution comes across as transparent, open and unbiased. We set the emphasis on needs and rights of the local population, that helps us depoliticise human rights issues. For our efforts to be fruitful, we talk to the other side of the conflict with clear human rights agenda, however difficult it might be.

I have also been advocating for engagement of international humanitarian and human rights missions in Georgia’s conflict zones. However, neither Russian Government nor de facto authorities seem to be interested. Thus, I would like to use this opportunity to invite NHRI to think how to ensure that that are no human rights grey zones.