A Milestone for Business and Human Rights

High Commissioner for Human Rights Navi Pillay hails a policy framework that underscores the corporate responsibility to respect human rights as “an important milestone.” The Human Rights Council on 2 June considered further practical recommendations on how to make companies human rights friendly.

The 47 member states of the Council unanimously backed the framework devised by John Ruggie, Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Business and Human Rights and, in its eighth session, adopted a resolution stating that “transnational corporations and other business enterprises have a responsibility to respect human rights.”

“After more than a decade of discussion, this simple statement both sets a new and clear benchmark and represents an important milestone in the evolving understanding of human rights in our societies,” Pillay says in her written contribution to the 2009 International Labour and Social Policy Review.

The Review, a publication by the International Organization of Employers, will be launched on 5 June in Geneva on the sidelines of the International Labour Conference.

"The private sector is an increasingly vital force in enabling the economic and social development that is so inextricably connected with human rights and security. Companies – sometimes intentionally, but more often inadvertently – can also impede the realisation of human rights, directly or indirectly, as a result of their own actions," says Pillay.

"Clarity about the baseline expectations of business with regard to human rights is a first important step towards developing appropriate and effective responses to such
problems."

The Human Rights Council further tasked Special Representative Ruggie to provide "practical recommendations" and "concrete guidance" to governments, businesses and other social actors on the framework's implementation.

“There has never been a more critical time” to address business and human rights, Ruggie said on 2 June when presenting his 2009 report to the Human Rights Council. “Human rights are most at risk in times of crisis, and economic crises pose a particular risk to economic and social rights.”

On the corporate responsibility to respect, Ruggie emphasized the importance for companies to exercise "human rights due diligence", whereby they can prevent and mitigate adverse human rights impacts through having a human rights policy in place to assess their activities.

The Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) contributes to the business and human rights agenda through its support to the Special Representative and partnership work with the UN Global Compact, a voluntary initiative to promote corporate citizenship which currently involves over 5,000 companies across 130 countries.

“The partnership between some of the world’s largest corporations, OHCHR and the UN Global Compact sends a powerful signal that human rights is indeed a business issue and that business itself should be directly involved in finding solutions to the challenge of integrating human rights into its core activities and policies,” says the High Commissioner.