ITEM 69 (c) HUMAN RIGHTS SITUATIONS

Third Committee Statement by H.E. Jim McLay
Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary Permanent Representative

31 October 2013
Mr Chairman:

Respect for universal human rights is fundamental to New Zealand’s domestic and foreign policy.

But, even with that fundamental commitment, we know that promoting the full enjoyment of human rights and fundamental freedoms by our own citizens is for all of us an ongoing process, one that requires constant self-monitoring and careful, honest self-assessment.

New Zealand has therefore supported the human rights treaty-body system since its inception, recognising the essential role it plays by providing an early warning mechanism and promoting robust national systems in all countries.

Along with about ninety other countries New Zealand maintains a standing invitation to all holders of United Nations Special Procedures mandates; and we have strongly supported the development and subsequent evolution of the Human Rights Council’s Universal Periodic Review (UPR) process, not least because it is a positive influence on our own domestic situation.

With the UPR second cycle now well under way, its value as a tool for the promotion and protection of human rights at a domestic level, and its concrete results on the ground, have been clearly demonstrated.

Taken together, such processes play an important role in promoting transparent, impartial and constructive assessments of sensitive human rights issues, and in assisting states to identify priority areas for action.

They deserve our open engagement and our full support.

Mr Chairman -
The waves of change that have washed across parts of North Africa and the Middle East over the past three years continue to present both opportunities and challenges for promoters of human rights in these countries.

Transitions towards a new, more open political order are inherently challenging and rarely linear.

In the short term, such transitions can throw up new threats to the full enjoyment of human rights in the countries in question.

While some have maintained solid progress on the human rights path over the past year, others have encountered significant setbacks and reversals.

But the genie of social and political change, once released, cannot easily be returned to the bottle.

Longer term, such countries face few alternatives to finding ways to accommodate their citizens’ demands for greater freedoms and more inclusive political systems.

Essential to lasting progress is the need to include a wide range of actors from civil society.

And the international community must also continue to extend its full support towards such efforts.

Having served as a government minister, I know that it’s never easy for Governments to hear criticisms, even in the most open societies.

Nevertheless, civil society and human rights defenders play a crucial role at the domestic and international levels in protecting and promoting human rights and in promoting democracy and the rule of law.
Restrictions and controls placed on freedom of expression, assembly and association by a number of states are concerning.

The contribution of civil society and human rights defenders is essential, and should be guaranteed without fear of reprisals or intimidation.

Indeed, we continue to see, in Syria, the grim consequences of addressing political demands with military solutions.

What started as non-violent protest has now spiraled out of control and into a brutal civil war which increasingly draws in external actors.

The worst fears of the international community regarding the human rights consequences of this conflict for ordinary Syrians have now been realised, indeed, they have been exceeded.

The list of atrocities recorded against civilians in both government- and opposition-held areas is now too long and well-documented to be ignored or credibly denied; and the ever-swelling numbers of refugees and internally displaced persons has highlighted, again, the plight of such victims of armed conflict the world over.

They demand our sympathy; but, even more, they need our sustained support.

In the year ahead our full attention must directed towards providing for the basic rights and needs of these civilians most affected by armed conflict, consistent with relevant international standards, and towards supporting those countries and organisations at the front-line of providing assistance.

Renewed efforts must also be directed towards ending the carnage in Syria before it spreads even further.
It should by now be abundantly clear that the only sustainable resolution will come through an inclusive political settlement which addresses the root causes of that awful conflict.

Mr Chairman -

No society – local or global – can expect to reach its full potential when it denies basic rights and the opportunity to participate fully in its economic, social, cultural, civil and political life to more than half its population.

All round the world, too many women and girls still face multiple barriers that prevent their access to quality education, healthcare, employment, property ownership and their participation in decision-making and political processes.

In many countries, women are unable to make, or are severely limited in making, choices on matters of profound significance for their lives.

And too many women and girls continue to experience horrific sexual and gender-based violence and abuse.

The past year has seen significant steps in our collective efforts to promote the rights of women and girls the world over.

My delegation applauds the landmark agreement by the Commission on the Status of Women in March on measures to combat all forms of violence against women and girls.

No country is immune from such violence, whether it arises from conflict situations, street or criminal violence or domestic upheaval; and it is our shared responsibility to take forward the practical implementation of those agreed conclusions as a matter of priority.
New Zealand is also one of 126 countries which have aligned themselves with the Ministerial Declaration of Commitment to End Sexual Violence in Conflict.

Thirteen years on since the adoption of Security Council Resolution 1325, we have a clear sense of what must be done to address this scourge.

Now is the time to act.

My delegation urges that, over the coming year, equal attention be paid to other fundamental challenges to the full enjoyment of human rights by women and girls, especially for those who are subject to multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination, including in the context of the post-2015 development agenda.

Mr Chairman -

Today’s turbulent times continue to present new challenges to the full enjoyment of human rights and fundamental freedoms in many countries.

But at the same time, the full enjoyment of these rights and freedoms is essential to ensuring safe and prosperous communities; and so it is that, in partnership with the international community, New Zealand will continue to work to secure those rights and freedoms.