

PRESS CONFERENCE ON CONVENTION ON RIGHTS OF PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES

Having received the 20 ratifications required for the landmark Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities to enter into force, the new instrument was now set to take effect on 3 May, Sha Zukang, Under-Secretary-General for Economic and Social Affairs, said at a Headquarters press conference this morning.

Accompanied by the Permanent Representatives of the three countries that ratified the Convention this week -- Maria Fernanda Espinosa (Ecuador), Mohammed al-Allaf (Jordan) and Habib Mansour (Tunisia) -- Mr. Sha said the Convention was not only the first comprehensive human rights treaty of the twenty-first century, it had been negotiated very quickly and would be one of the fastest to enter into force.

Adopted by the General Assembly in December 2006, the Convention seeks to ensure that the world's 650 million people with disabilities "enjoy the universal human rights that everyone else does in their respective societies". One hundred twenty-six countries have signed the instrument and 71 have signed its Optional Protocol, which will allow individuals and groups to petition for relief.

The Convention was deeply rooted in the goals of the United Nations and the Charter vision of a just and peaceful world and better standards of life and larger freedoms, the Under-Secretary-General said. Through its 50 articles and Optional Protocol, the new treaty aimed to promote and protect the full enjoyment of human rights and fundamental freedoms by all persons with disabilities while promoting respect for their human dignity.

He went on to describe the Convention as a critical entry point for building a society that valued difference and respected the equality of all human beings. That included ensuring the integration of persons with disabilities into development activities and mainstreaming disability issues into the wider development agenda. It was now time to commence implementation without delay.

Ms. Espinosa said his country was proud to have become the twentieth nation to ratify the Convention, which reflected its domestic policy and commitment. Out of Ecuador's population of 13 million, 1.6 million were disabled and it was the State's responsibility to ensure their rights and inclusion. It was no coincidence that Ecuador's Vice-President was a disabled person.

Noting that her country's delegation had been very active in the negotiations on the instrument, she said it had presided over the ad hoc group on the drafting of the Convention, which had been open to civil society and interested groups. As it pursued a national campaign named "Ecuador without Fences", the Government sought to transform itself into a country without physical, legal, institutional or mental fences, which would make the inclusion of disabled people a reality. Among other things, the Government was planning a job-creation project and promoting high-quality education for people with disabilities.

Mr. Al-Allaf said his country emphasized the importance of active participation by people with disabilities and their representative organizations in the drafting, monitoring and implementation of the new treaty, adding that Jordan's delegation had included experts with disabilities. Committed to creating a just and equitable society for all persons, Jordan was party to 17 international instruments, including six core human rights treaties. All Jordanians were accorded equal rights under national legislation, and in 2005, the country had received the Franklin Delano Roosevelt International Disability Award.

Outlining Jordan's 1993 law on the welfare of disabled persons, he said the National Charter affirmed and enumerated the rights of disabled citizens, including the right to be integrated into society, education, employment and health care. The new disability law of 2007 had integrated into national legislation the new areas taken from the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. A related national strategy sought to reduce the rate of disability by 5 per cent in its first stage (2007-2009) and 15 per cent in the second (2010-2015), and to enhance the quality of life for disabled persons. The Convention would help Jordan further develop local policies, review domestic legislation and enrich programmes for the country's 200,000 people with disabilities.

Mr. Mansour emphasized that the real challenge was implementation -- not only providing help, but giving disabled people a real chance for integration. Presenting its periodic report on compliance with the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights to the Human Rights Committee on 18 March, Tunisia had reiterated its determination to advance in the promotion of human rights, a commitment reflected by its ratification of the new Convention. Tunisia's policies and strategy were based on solidarity among generations, social groups and persons, a principle that encompassed disability programmes. It was important to give dignity to persons with disabilities and to provide them with opportunities. New legislation in place since 2005 provided quotas for persons with disabilities and incentives to strengthen their employability.

Asked to comment on the unwillingness of some countries, including the United States, to sign the Convention on the grounds that their domestic legislation already went beyond the provisions of the new treaty, Mr. Al-Allaf said the Convention was an internationally accepted instrument outlining the principles and defining the mechanisms for States parties to follow. Accession was important for its universality.

Ms. Espinosa added that, while the decision to sign the Convention or not was a domestic one, it was in the interest of humankind that more countries express their commitment by signing it.

In response to a question about national initiatives to promote the rights of people with disabilities, Mr. Al-Allaf said that, in addition to relevant legislation, his country had established the National Council of Disabled Jordanians, which sought to ensure a high level of mobility, accessibility, equal opportunities and integration of people with disabilities.

Ms. Espinosa said the ratification of the Convention was part of her country's bilateral and regional agenda to fight discrimination and exclusion. On the domestic level, Ecuador was going beyond what the Convention required. There was significant public investment in the creation of jobs and access to high-level education for disabled people, as well as medical and social services. The Government was also putting in place national programmes that addressed cultural diversity among disabled people. Ecuador's legal reforms included measures to bring the Convention into harmony with domestic laws.

Mr. Mansour said that, while his country had been among the first to ratify the new instrument, it had, in fact, been taking important measures to promote the rights of people with disabilities since the end of the 1980s. Among other things, the Government was creating adequate infrastructure and encouraging telecommuting for people with disabilities.

To several other questions, Ms. Espinosa replied that, once ratified, international conventions became national law in her country. The domestic legal system needed upgrading to bring it in line with international law. Ecuador was working on a broad holistic reform, including reform of the social security and employment systems, to build a true welfare State. Ecuador also had an affirmative-action policy for disabled people.

Mr. Al-Allaf added that his country's latest legislation had been taken from the Convention and was legally binding. A 2007 law outlawed discrimination against people with disabilities in the labour market and in wages.