



COUNCIL ON HUMAN RIGHTS

ORAL STATEMENT OF MR. JEAN ZIEGLER,

SPECIAL RAPPORTEUR ON THE RIGHT TO FOOD

22 September 2006

Monsieur le President, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I have the honour to present today my report as Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food, as requested by the resolution 2005/18 of the Commission on Human Rights. I also present two reports in addendum on my missions to examine the situation of the right to food in two very different countries: India and Guatemala.

As I am sure you will agree, all human beings have a right to live in dignity, free from hunger. The right to food is a human right protected under international human rights and humanitarian law. The right to food is “the right to have regular, permanent and unrestricted access, either directly or by means of financial purchases, to quantitatively and qualitatively adequate and sufficient food corresponding to the cultural traditions of the people to which the consumer belongs, and which ensures a physical and mental, individual and collective, fulfilling and dignified life free of fear.”

Yet hunger and chronic malnutrition still sentence millions of people to underdevelopment and early death. As we speak, the effects of conflict in Sudan, in Lebanon, in the Palestinian territories, Sri Lanka are having severe impacts on the right to food and the livelihoods of thousands of people. Food crises across Africa continue to take a heavy toll, and the situation of the right to food remains precarious in Myanmar and in the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea. But there are hungry people in every country of the world. Globally, more than 852 million people do not eat enough every day to sustain a healthy life. Global hunger has been rising since 1996. We are failing to meet the World Food Summit commitments to cut hunger, we are failing to meet commitments to meet MDG 1. Every year, more than 6 million children die before their fifth birthday for lack of sufficient food. Millions more are handicapped for life by malnutrition – without adequate food, brain cells do not develop, bodies are stunted, diseases become rife.

In my report presented today, I bring to your attention the continuing crisis in Niger, following my emergency mission there in July 2005 to bring that forgotten crisis to the attention of the international community. Niger is a proud country inhabited by some of the greatest civilizations of humanity - the Songhai, the Djerma, the Hausa, the Tuareg, the Peul - courageous and hardworking men and women of great dignity. Yet during my mission, I witnessed the gravity of the crisis. I found that almost a third of the population, about 3.6

million people, including 800,000 children, were facing acute malnutrition, and in some regions vulnerable people, in particular infant children, were already dying from starvation. Niger's children, living in a country that is repeatedly hit by famine, have a very precarious chance of living beyond their fifth birthday. The poorest country in the world, it receives very little development assistance that would help it to break out of the vicious cycle of drought and famine.

In my first addendum report, I also bring your attention to the situation of the right to food in India. During my visit in August 2005, I found that India is now a world power and is becoming increasingly important on the international stage, and it is the birthplace of some of the world's most ancient cultures. With such an immense population of more than 1 billion people, it is still working to overcome hunger and extreme poverty. The majority of the world's undernourished people today live in India. Nearly 2 million Indian children die every year as a result of serious malnutrition and preventable diseases. Nearly a third of children (30 per cent) are born underweight, which means that their mothers are themselves underweight and undernourished. But the Government of India is overcoming these problems. It has conquered the threats of large-scale famine that plagued its history. It runs the largest Public Food Distribution System in the world that reaches into every village in India. It is challenging discrimination through its Supreme Court, which has also made groundbreaking legal decisions related to the right to food. Freedom from hunger is understood as a human right. The efforts of the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance Government, elected in 2004, have already made a difference. But greater efforts will still be needed to fight discrimination, corruption, impunity and ensure access to justice to protect the right to food for all people in India. It is also still necessary to ensure a better distribution of the benefits of India's current economic growth. All people in India must start to benefit from economic development, otherwise the poorest and most marginalised will increasingly be left behind in hunger and poverty.

In my second addendum report, I also call your attention to the situation of the right to food in Guatemala based on my report of my mission there in February 2005. A proud and incredibly diverse and colourful country, Guatemala has a population of 12 million people with at least 24 different ethno-linguistic groups amongst the indigenous population. However, with a long history of inequality, social exclusion and discrimination against the indigenous population, Guatemala is still working to overcome the malnutrition amongst its children, especially indigenous children. Chronic child malnutrition is more than twice as high in Guatemala than in most countries of Latin America, and Guatemala remains one of the countries with the most inequitable distribution of resources in the world. The efforts of the current Government to combat malnutrition amongst its children are impressive. The election of the current Government in 2004 marked a new beginning, and the creation of a national "Front against Hunger" and a powerful legal and policy framework that recognizes the right to food. Following my visit, the Government announced the passing of a new National Law on Food Security that reiterates the Government commitment to the right to food and establishes a national system for the protection and progressive realization of the right to food. At the international level, Guatemala has been instrumental in the global fight against hunger through the holding of a Latin American conference on hunger eradication, *la Conferencia Latinoamericana sobre el Hambre Crónica*, in September 2005. Efforts are still needed to resolve the agrarian conflict and inequalities in access to productive resources particularly for the indigenous peoples, as well as strengthening equal protection before the law to ensure access to justice for the right to food in Guatemala.

Finally, my general report examines the impact of globalisation on the right to food across the world. In our age of globalization and increasing interconnectedness, we live in a world where the actions and policies of one country can have far-reaching effects on the citizens of other countries, when powerful international financial institutions (such as the IMF and the World Bank) can dictate that Governments must reduce the resources they spend to fight hunger and malnutrition, when transnational corporations can abuse their power with impunity. My report therefore sets out the obligations of all under the right to food. While national governments still bear primary responsibility, other actors must also accept the responsibility to respect the right to food. In an age when other public and private actors are more powerful than States, human rights must be extended to limit their potential abuses of power against the citizens of our countries. With power must come responsibility.

All human beings have a right to live in dignity, free from hunger and starvation.

Thank you.