Ghana urged to step up rights protection amid economic boom

ACCRA (17 July 2013) – Ghana needs to prepare its economy, society and institutions to ensure its expanding economy does not undermine human rights protection, the UN Working Group on Business and Human Rights has cautioned.

“Rapid economic growth can pose big challenges for protecting rights,” said Working Group member Alexandra Guáqueta at the end of a 10-day official visit to Ghana.* “National and foreign investors need to demonstrate greater respect for human rights as they participate in Ghana’s growth,” she added.

Ms Guáqueta and fellow expert Pavel Sulyandziga urged the Ghanaian Government to ensure that the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights** were at the heart of the new policy on corporate social responsibility being developed by the Ministry of Trade and Industry. The principles should also guide the work of the Ghana Investment Promotion Centre and the Ghana Free Zones Board, and be incorporated in Ghana’s trade and investment agreements.

“Ghana should build on its successful investment in modern institutions for trade promotion and investment to ensure that other key institutions dealing with business, such as the Ministry of Employment and Labour Relations and the Judiciary, have the necessary resources and training to provide effective oversight," said Mr. Sulyandziga.

The Working Group experts said Ghana had a relatively strong legal framework in place to protect rights. However, laws and regulations on child labour, health and safety, working hours and employment discrimination against women are often not effectively implemented by businesses nor enforced by authorities. People, particularly in rural areas and the informal sector, faced practical obstacles in getting effective remedy through the justice system, the experts noted.

In Ghana’s cocoa sector, the Working Group saw evidence that reducing the worst forms of child labour is possible. The experts visited two cocoa-farming communities, where people are involved in devising concrete measures to protect children, including access to education. These have been complemented with training to increase food security and generate cash crops. Such supply-chain initiatives have been made possible by the collective efforts of international chocolate brands and buyers, the Government, the International Labour Organization and donors. The Working Group also heard of Government efforts to reduce human trafficking and child labour in the fishing industry, with the support of the International Organization for Migration.

“Now industry and the Government must go further, learn from these positive community initiatives, and scale up their action to the cocoa sector at large. The positive lessons from the cocoa industry should also inform existing efforts in other
sectors where children’s rights are at risk, such as fishing and artisanal mining,” said Mr. Sulyandziga.

The Working Group saw the mining industry’s efforts to address its impact on communities, deriving from environmental pollution, land acquisition and resettlement from both past and more current operations.

“Both mining companies and the Government have a clear responsibility to address legacy issues that infringe on access to both clean water and land. This is especially important given the complex nature of land ownership and tenure in Ghana,” said Mr Sulyandziga. “The Government and companies, while recognizing existing customs and traditions, must ensure that all community members are fully informed about proposed projects and are consulted, and are part of decision-making processes that affect them, including on prevention, mitigation and compensation of any negative effects.”

The experts also saw evidence of child labour in illegal small-scale mining operations, which also cause environmental damage and water pollution that directly affect communities and people’s livelihoods. The President has set up a Government Task Force to address the multiple adverse consequences of this activity.

“Both the Government and the gold industry have a responsibility to ensure that human and labour rights considerations are integrated in their response,” said Ms. Guáqueta.

The solution to the problem of illegal mining, she said, included improved monitoring to cover relevant small-scale mining zones, technical capacity on human rights and environmental standards for those who want to follow the rules, and efficient policing

“Integrating human rights will also be important regarding the use of public security forces in the response of the Government, and Ghana should consider joining the Voluntary Principles on Security and Human Rights,” Ms Guáqueta added.

During their visit, the Working Group experts had meetings in Accra, and in Ashanti and Central regions. The Working Group will present detailed observations and recommendations from the visit in a report to be presented to the Human Rights Council in June 2014.


(**) Adopted by the UN Human Rights Council in 2011, the Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights provide the first authoritative global standard to prevent and address adverse impacts on human rights of business activities: http://www.ohchr.org/EN/Issues/Business/Pages/Tools.aspx

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The Working Group was established by the United Nations Human Rights Council in June 2011. The five members are Mr. Michael Addo, Ms. Alexandra Guáqueta, Ms. Margaret Jungk, Mr. Puvan Selvanathan and Mr. Pavel Sulyandziga (current Chairperson-Rapporteur). The Working Group is independent from any government or organization. It reports to the Human Rights Council and to the UN General Assembly. Learn more, visit:


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