

PRESS RELEASE: FOR RELEASE FRIDAY 6TH SEPTEMBER

“UN Expert Makes Visit to North Belfast Social Housing Estates as part of Official Mission”

The United Nations Special Rapporteur on housing, Ms. Raquel Rolnik*, will today (Friday 6th September) visit social housing developments in North Belfast to examine conditions and meet residents as part of her official mission to the United Kingdom.* The visit comes in the wake of the ‘Equality Can’t Wait’ report launched last month by the Participation and the Practice of Rights (PPR)** organisation, which detailed a decade’s worth of missed opportunities and failures by the government to tackle the housing crisis in North Belfast.***

The UN Mission will be the first official information-gathering visit to the UK by an independent expert focusing on the right to adequate housing.

Ms Rolnik will visit both the Seven Towers flats in the New Lodge and Harborview apartments in Pilot Street. Residents in both areas have been working with PPR to monitor their housing conditions using human rights standards.

Seven Towers resident Hugh McAuley lives on the 12th floor of Finn House in the Seven Towers with his four children. Their home is poorly heated and riddled with damp. Mr McAuley said:

“All I want is a decent home for my family, I hope that the Special Rapportuer’s visit will shine a spotlight on the poor housing conditions people like me and my family have to face every day. I hope that her mission will force the government to sit up and take action”

The visit to both housing complexes comes one week after Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People (NICCY), Patricia Lewsley-Mooney urged the Housing Executive and Clanmill Housing Association to take action to improve the conditions in each area. Ms Lewsley-Mooney said;

*“While I understand the difficulties in the current economic climate, it is not good enough in the 21st Century for children to have to live in this type of inappropriate accommodation with all the associated risks. I will be writing to the Chief Executive and Chairman of the Housing Executive and Clanmil Housing Association, and the Minister for Social Development to ask how they intend to address the conditions in which children are living.”*****

Commenting on the significance of Ms Rolnik’s visit to both housing complexes in North Belfast during the visit, Kate Ward, Policy and Research Support Officer from PPR, stated;

“Last month’s ‘Equality Can’t Wait’ Report evidenced the failures on the part of a range of public bodies to address housing inequality in North Belfast which impacts the Catholic

community. Today the UN Rapporteur will see the impact that has on the ground. The plight of families such as Hugh's who are trapped in poor housing is a direct result of failures by public bodies, particularly the Department for Social Development and the Housing Executive to meaningfully address the housing crisis here. In May 2009 the United Nations' called on the government to take action to tackle inequality facing the Catholic community in North Belfast but this has not been acted upon. The visit by the United Nations Rapporteur to residents, whose housing rights are being ignored locally, is therefore extremely significant."

The Special Rapporteur has been meeting with government officials working on housing issues, various human rights commissions, academics and civil society. At the beginning of her visit, which also includes London, Manchester, Glasgow, and Edinburgh, Ms Rolnik stated:

*"The UK faces a unique moment, when the challenge to promote and protect the right to adequate housing for all is on the agenda. In doing so, special attention would need to be given to responding to the specific situations of various population groups, in particular low-income households and other marginalized individuals and groups."******

Ms Rolnik will prepare an official report of her visit, which will be presented to the United Nations Human Rights Council (an inter-governmental body responsible for protecting human rights across the globe) in March 2014.

ENDS

Notes to Editors

*** Ms. Raquel Rolnik** was appointed in 2008 as the UN Special Rapporteur on adequate housing as a component of the right to an adequate standard of living and on the right to non-discrimination in this context. Ms. Rolnik is an architect and an urban planner, with over 30 years of experience in planning and urban land management. Based in Sao Paulo, she is a professor at the Faculty of Architecture and Urbanism of the University of Sao Paulo and is the author of several books and articles on the urban issue. In her career, she has held various government positions and has also worked with international and civil society organizations. She has advised national and local governments on policy reform as well as on planning and management of housing and local development programs.

**** The Participation and the Practice of Rights (PPR)** organisation was founded by renowned human rights activist, the late Inez McCormack and was recognised by the UN in 2012 for its work on housing in Northern Ireland. PPR works to put socio economic rights at the service of the most vulnerable. Currently PPR works to support groups on a number of issues including housing, mental health, urban regeneration and unemployment. PPR is based in Belfast. For more information see www.pprproject.org

******* For more on the Equality Can't Wait report, including an Executive Summary and key recommendations, please see <http://www.pprproject.org/content/ppr-launch-housing-inequality-report>

****For more on the visit to the Seven Towers and Harborview social housing complexes, by the NICCY Commissioner, including the Commissioner's statement, please see <http://www.pprproject.org/content/commissioner-children-says-north-belfast-high-rise-housing-not-good-enough>

***** The Concluding Observations of the United Nations Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights included the following direction to the UK Government.

"The Committee is concerned about the chronic shortage of housing, in particular social housing, for the most disadvantaged and marginalized individuals and groups, such as... Catholic families in Northern Belfast, in spite of the financial resources provided, and other measures taken, by the State party in this regard."

***** Ms Rolnik's full comments along with further information on the mission, including the official press release and further contact details can be found at <http://direitoamoradia.org/?p=21347&lang=en>