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Spain: Human rights need particular protection in times of economic crisis and austerity budgets

Madrid, 7/6/2013 - "All efforts should be made by the Spanish authorities to assess and limit the negative impact of budgetary cuts on the most vulnerable groups, in particular children and persons with disabilities" stated Nils Muižnieks, the Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights at the end of a five day visit to Madrid and Seville.

The Commissioner notes with concern that about 30% of Spanish children are at risk of poverty. He was informed of cases of children fainting while at school due to lack of a proper meal and having to wear the same clothes for three weeks. "Social protection, access to health care, adequate housing and quality education are crucial rights, protected by the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. They cannot be ignored even in times of strict austerity measures".

While welcoming the adoption by the Andalusian authorities of an emergency plan to ensure adequate nutrition of children, the Commissioner underlines that "combating child poverty should be higher on the agenda of the authorities at all levels."

Commissioner Muižnieks praises the work of the numerous civil society organisations active in the area of persons with disabilities, often in close cooperation with the authorities. "Important steps have been made in the last decade advancing the rights of persons with disabilities in Spain, in line with the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. However, concerns remain about the increasingly adverse impact that budgetary restrictions have on the enjoyment by persons with disabilities of their rights, notably those concerning their autonomy and access to public services.

The Commissioner also paid particular attention to the work of the police in anti-austerity demonstrations that have multiplied in Spain in the last two years. He notes that the frequently reported lack of identification of police officers during demonstrations prevents effective investigation and sanction for possible abuse. "It is a positive step that the national police have made it now easier the identification of police officers. This measure must be rigorously applied.

Furthermore, Commissioner's Muižnieks calls on the Spanish authorities to immediately abandon the practice of granting pardon to law enforcement officials convicted for serious human rights violations, such as torture. "This practice must end as it perpetuates impunity among law enforcement officials and runs counter to European human rights standards."

Lastly, the Commissioner is concerned about the lack of clarity in the planned changes concerning civic education, stressing that "human rights education is key to combat all forms of discrimination and intolerance and to develop generations of active and responsible citizens in a democratic society."

The Commissioner's report on his visit is forthcoming.

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The Commissioner for Human Rights is an independent, non-judicial institution within the Council of Europe, mandated to promote awareness of, and respect for, human rights in the 47 member states of the Organisation. Elected by the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, the present Commissioner, Mr Nils Muižnieks, took up his function on 1 April 2012