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I. Introduction

During this period, the transition from the Commission on Human Rights (CHR) to the Human Rights Council (HRC) has been completed, and the process of reform of UN human rights bodies has also seen the replacement of the previous CHR Sub-Commission on Human Rights with an HRC Advisory Committee to be composed of 18 expert members. The former Sub-Commission Working Group on Minorities (WGM) has been abolished, to be replaced in August 2007 by a Forum on Minority Issues, which will meet for two days annually and report directly to the HRC. Another important innovation is the HRC Universal Periodic Review (UPR) mechanism, which will review 48 states annually “on the fulfillment by each State of its human rights obligations and commitments in a manner which ensures universality of coverage and equal treatment with respect to all States”. With the ongoing review of the thematic and country mandates under the ‘special procedures’, the period remains a transitory

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1 For information on the institution-building process and developments regarding the United Nations Human Rights Council, see <http://www.ohchr.org/english/bodies/hrcouncil>.

2 General Assembly, Resolution 60/251, adopted 3 April 2006, which created the Human Rights Council, decided that the Council shall “undertake a universal periodic review, based on objective and reliable information, of the fulfillment by each State of its human rights obligations and commitments in a manner which ensures universality of coverage and equal treatment with respect to all States”. The basis of the review, its principles and objectives, its process and modalities, as well as the outcome of the review are outlined in Human Rights Council, Resolution 5/1, adopted 18 June 2007. See <http://www.ohchr.org/en/hrbodies/upr>.
one for the UN human rights machinery.\footnote{For an overview of UN human rights special procedures, see <http://www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/chr/special/index.htm>.} By December 2007, two country-specific mandates had been discontinued: the Special Rapporteurs on the human rights situations in Belarus and Cuba, respectively. No thematic special procedures mandates were discontinued during 2007, while a Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of slavery, including its causes and its consequences, was appointed to replace the former CHR Sub-Commission Working Group on this theme.\footnote{The HRC established a Special Rapporteur on Contemporary Forms of Slavery, including its Causes and its Consequences, on 28 September 2007. See <http://ap.ohchr.org/documents/E/HRC/resolutions/A_HRC_RES_6_14.pdf>.} While it remains premature to assess the overall effects of these recent changes, the optimistic voices promoting the new institutions as a new era of UN rights protection remain matched by more cautious voices foreseeing more modest outcomes.

During 2006-07, the UN Independent Expert on minority issues (hereinafter “Independent Expert” or IEMI), a special procedures mandate established in 2005, has consolidated a practice of official country visits, developed her communications procedures and consultations with governments, and embarked on a range of thematic and country-specific activities. The Independent Expert, Ms Gay J. McDougall, is building a track record of constructive engagement with states, UN entities and other intergovernmental organizations, non-governmental organizations and representatives of minority communities to promote and protect the rights of persons belonging to national, ethnic, religious and linguistic minority groups. At the core of her mandate, the Independent Expert is tasked with promoting the implementation of the 1992 UN Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities (hereinafter “UN Declaration on Minorities”).\footnote{UN Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities, adopted 18 December 1992, at <http://www.unhchr.ch/html/menu3/b/d_minori.htm>.}

An additional function of Ms McDougall during this period followed her election in June 2007 as chairperson of the Coordination Committee of all UN special procedures mandate holders.\footnote{See United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, “Promotion and Protection of All Human Rights, Civil, Political, Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, including the Right to Development”, Report of the Fourteenth Meeting of Special Rapporteurs/Representatives, Independent Experts and Chairpersons of Working Groups of the Special Procedures of the Council and of the Advisory Services Programme, UN Doc. A/HRC/7/29, para. 6, at <http://www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/chr/special/docs/report14th.pdf>.} The tasks of the Coordination Committee include “raising the concerns of mandate holders in discussions of the Human Rights Council” and “proactively identifying issues of concern to groups of mandates and facilitating joint action on cross-cutting issues or issues of shared concern”.\footnote{For information on the Coordination Committee of the United Nations special procedures, see <http://www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/chr/special/ccspecialprocedures.htm>.}

At the time of writing, the Independent Expert is preparing to present her third annual report to the seventh session of the Human Rights Council in March 2008,