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Mikhail Kamynin, the Spokesman of Russia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Answers Media Questions Regarding an Upcoming Visit to Russia of Louise Arbour, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights

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Question: Louise Arbour, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, will be in Russia on a working visit from February 19-25. What is the program of her stay?

Answer: Scheduled are the High Commissioner's trips to the North Caucasus and St. Petersburg and meetings in Moscow. In the course of the sojourn including visiting the regions, she will be accompanied by Ella Pamfilova, Chair of the Presidential Council on Civil Society and Human Rights.

Question: Please comment on Russian relations with the institution of the UN High Commissioner in the context of the present visit.

Answer: We regard this visit as a continuation of the dialogue begun during Louise Arbour's first visit to Russia in February 2005. Besides, her visiting our country at present is extremely important from the vantage point of the development of contacts with the High Commissioner, who entered upon her duties from July 1, 2004, and the arrangement of the entire range of Russian relations with UN human rights mechanisms in the long term. Concrete proof of our interest in an effective UN human rights activity, as also evidence of our support for the institution of the High Commissioner was the decision of the Russian Federation Government of December 2005 to make, starting in 2006, an annual voluntary contribution by Russia to the budget of the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights of 2 million US dollars.

Question: What are the themes of the upcoming meetings and conversations?

Answer: In the course of her travel to subjects of the Russian Federation, the High Commissioner will on the ground acquaint herself with the efforts of bodies of power for the encouragement and defense of human rights and freedoms, including those in the aspects of a return to normalcy in the North Caucasus region. A subject of the High Commissioner's talks with senior officials from Russian ministries and agencies will be issues pertaining to human rights in Russia and the prospects of expanding our engagement with the UN in this area. In this connection we count on the continuation of technical cooperation programs

between Russia and the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights.

In addition, views are expected to be exchanged on a number of topical aspects of the international human rights agenda. Among them, above all, the prospects of reforming the UN human rights sector (including the question of the establishment of a Human Rights Council to replace the UN Commission on Human Rights), the problem of the politicization of the human rights theme and of the policy of "double standards" in this area, and the threat to human rights that international terrorism carries with it.

Question: What is Russia's approach in general to the problem of engagement with international human rights bodies?

Answer: The Russian Federation attaches great importance to international cooperation with respect to the defense and encouragement of human rights, which we strive to promote not only within the UN system, but also in the regional and bilateral format. The regular visits to our country by international human rights experts under the auspices of the UN, OSCE and Council of Europe, Russia's conscientious fulfillment of its obligations under universal and regional human rights agreements, and our active participation in the work of the main human rights forums of the UN - the General Assembly Third Committee and the UN Commission on Human Rights - are testimony to this.

By and large it can be stated that Russian engagement with the international human rights institutions and mechanisms is picking up speed, and this in turn yields positive dividends in terms of the observance of human rights standards at home and conduces to the formation of a human rights culture in our country, to the development of national democratic institutions and to the strengthening of the rule-of-law state. It is from this vantage point that one should view this invitation to Louise Arbour to visit Russia again.

In principle, we assume that international human rights cooperation should rest strictly on an equal and respectful basis in accordance with the Charter of the United Nations and serve the rapprochement of countries with due consideration for regional specifics and the national, cultural, religious and historical traditions of states.

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