

New Zealand’s housing crisis requires bold human rights response, says UN rights expert

GENEVA (19 February 2020) – “The Government of New Zealand has recognized that the country is facing a housing crisis,” said the UN Special Rapporteur on the right to housing, Leilani Farha, at the end of her visit to New Zealand.

“While the government has taken important steps to improve the situation, solving the root causes of the crisis, however, will require a more ambitious, innovative and courageous approach,” said Farha.

“If one in every hundred people is homeless, half of whom are under 25 years; if thousands are living in vehicles or housed in motels by the State; if houses are in such disrepair that they cause otherwise preventable illness and disease; and if middle income earners are finding it difficult to afford an accessible and decent home – the result is not just a housing crisis, it is a human rights crisis of significant proportions. These conditions indicate not only violations of the right to housing, but also of the right to health, security and life.”

At the root of the crisis is a speculative housing market that has been supported by successive governments who have promoted homeownership as an investment, while until recently discontinuing the provision of social housing and providing inadequate tenant protections.

The human rights crisis has hit the most marginalized the hardest: Māori, Pacific peoples, persons with disabilities, single parents, LGBTQI+, immigrants and others.

“It is not clear to me that the Government has pursued all options to address the housing crisis. It will take courage and new ideas, and it may require taking what are perceived as politically unpopular decisions, such as imposing a capital gains tax on the sale of residential properties, rent freezes, innovative uses of vacant homes, and tighter regulation of short term rental platforms.

A human rights crisis demands a human rights response. The Government must recognize in national law that housing is a fundamental human right requiring legal protection. In my view New Zealand must also adopt a comprehensive rights-based housing strategy that focuses on structural changes and that sets short- and long-term targets and establishes monitoring and accountability mechanisms.

“It is encouraging that the Waitangi Tribunal will undertake a housing inquiry. I would hope that the inquiry would be informed by the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, which provides a right to be actively involved in housing programmes affecting them and to administer those through their own institutions”.

“It is time to bring human rights home so that all people in New Zealand can enjoy the right to housing,” concluded Farha.

ENDS

Ms Leilani Farha is 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. She took up her mandate in June 2014. Farha is the Executive Director of the NGO Canada without Poverty, based in Ottawa. A lawyer by training, for the past 20 years Ms. Farha has worked both internationally and domestically on the implementation of the right to adequate housing for the most marginalized groups and on the situation of people living in poverty. Her most recent [report to the Human Rights Council](#) focusses on access to justice for the right to housing.

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UN Human Rights, Country Page — [New Zealand](#)

For more information and media requests please contact:

Mr. Gunnar Theissen during the visit at: +41-79 444 4078 / gtheissen@ohchr.org

After the visit at: +41 22 917 9321 or write to srhousing@ohchr.org

For media inquiries related to other UN independent experts: The Media Unit (+ 41 22 928 9855 / mediaconsultant2@ohchr.org)

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