Madame Chair, Distinguished members of the Fifth Committee,

It is a pleasure for me to be with you today, on behalf of the High Commissioner. The High Commissioner has asked me to pass on his deep apologies that he cannot be here in person as indeed he had planned to be. So it is on his behalf that I introduce the Report of the Secretary-General on the “Proposed regional restructuring of the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights: increasing efficiency and effectiveness in the implementation of General Assembly resolution 48/141” (A/71/218). This report is submitted in response to paragraph 84 of General Assembly resolution 70/247 on questions relating to the proposed programme budget for the biennium 2016-2017.

While this report provides the opportunity to briefly present the High Commissioner’s overall vision for the Office, it responds more fully to the specific request by this body to provide further information on the strengthening of our regional offices. In preparing this report, our Office has listened carefully to the suggestions and concerns of distinguished members of the Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions, as well as Member States over the course of the numerous consultations that we have held on these issues over the past year. We are very grateful for those comments, which have helped us to improve and further expand upon our proposals.

According to General Assembly resolution 48/141, it is the responsibility of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights to improve – and I quote - “the efficiency and effectiveness of the United Nations machinery in the field of Human Rights” (para 4j). The report we present to you today is part of our effort to fulfil that responsibility. The overall purpose of the proposal is to strengthen the efficiency and the effectiveness of the OHCHR both in carrying out its mandate and in implementing Programme 20, Human Rights, of the Secretary-General’s Strategic Framework.

We seek through this initiative to be a robust and relevant organisation, better suited to contemporary challenges, more flexible, adaptable and responsive to Member States requests and directives and more relevant to the shifting opportunities for and threat to the advance of human rights. In other words, to better implement the mandate given to us more than twenty years ago.
To fulfil our responsibilities, OHCHR must be a partner to others that is both able and adept – working with our partners to help translate international standards and the decisions of Member States into policy and programmes on the ground. We must have the operating capability needed to deliver high quality and timely information, advice and support to Member States so that they in turn are better equipped to uphold their human rights obligations. And this proposal is intended to enable us to do just that. The changes proposed will mean that we can achieve operating efficiencies within our limited resources that will further strengthen OHCHR’s ability to implement its mandate. They will bring OHCHR closer to the contexts in which Member States operate for stronger relevance and responsiveness and they will enable us to forge further constructive partnerships with regional and national stakeholders. The proposed changes will enable our better integration into the work of UN Country Teams and other UN partners. Our experience to date confirms that regional operations help to make our support more accessible, more timely, better tailored to local needs and thus more impactful.

The regional restructuring does not change our existing mandate, programme or functions. Our mandate – gifted to us by Member States through General Assembly resolution 48/141 – is universal in recognition that all regions of the world need support in addressing their human rights challenges. What we are proposing here is about enhanced implementation of that mandate – more efficient and effective delivery, within the same budgetary envelope. The core element of this proposal is the transfer of a limited number of existing functions from our Geneva-based headquarters to both strengthened and some new regional offices. This also includes a shifting of supervisory and programmatic responsibilities for country-level presences to the regional office and a shifting too of the development and implementation of the related regional and country operational plans.

In concrete terms, this involves a strengthening of six existing OHCHR regional presences already approved by this body – those located in Addis Ababa, Bangkok, Beirut, Brussels, Dakar and Panama City – and an opening of two new regional presences, one in Washington, DC and one in Istanbul. The two new regional offices add significantly to the geographical reach and balance of our field deployment – consistent with our universal mandate.

The Washington, DC office would not only take on board core responsibilities for North America and the English-speaking Caribbean, it would assist our partnership with key regional organizations such as the Organization of American States and the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights and support our stronger engagement with global and regional institutions working on matters affecting the right to development such as the World Bank. More substantial engagement within these institutions will be invaluable for our effective contribution to implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals as an unprecedented opportunity to advance our mandate for economic, social and cultural rights.
None of our field presences will be discontinued as a result of this initiative. This reflects our understanding of the requests of Member States and is a major difference from last year’s proposal. Indeed, the regions with which we are seeking to more effectively engage are vast both in terms of their geographic scope and the number of countries to be covered. Thus, we also propose to maintain as satellites to the strengthened regional offices, our current regional presences in Bishkek, Pretoria, Santiago and Suva in their respective regions. In addition, we are now proposing to open a presence in Bridgetown which would come under the Regional Office for North America and the English-speaking Caribbean.

Existing regional offices will continue to support the countries that they currently support. New regional offices will support in principle all countries in their respective region, but, in line with the approach adopted by other United Nations entities, this may be adjusted on the basis of political, security and linguistic considerations, in bilateral consultation with concerned countries.

Our proposal is budget neutral. We simply are proposing a shift of existing resources from Geneva to the field. The basic staffing structure of the regional offices is also designed to make the most effective and efficient use of available resources. It is proposed that a regional office be built up according to regional needs from a baseline staffing structure of a minimum number of six staff posts funded from the regular budget (1 D-1, 1 P-5, 2 P-4 and 2 P-3 posts). This minimum staffing structure will provide the essential functions required of all regional offices. However, this is not a one-size-fits-all model. Indeed, as is the case today, adaptation of regional offices’ staff and priorities to their unique contexts is enabled by extra-budgetary resources.

Overall – although this proposal is modest, it can drive significant positive impact. We propose the move of only 18 regular budget posts out of Geneva, reclassifying nine of those, and replacing three Geneva based General Service posts with new field based professional posts. These relatively modest changes amount to a change of just 4% of our regular budget staff and leave undisturbed our mandated functions of support for the Human Rights Council, the Treaty Bodies and Special Procedures. However, by their more strategic location and focus, and through the leverage they can provide for our country-based work – we can improve our effectiveness, realizing more fully the promise already shown by existing regional presences.

And this will be done within existing regular budget resources, as the proposed changes will be funded with the savings generated by the move of regular budget posts and related resources to lower cost duty stations. Furthermore, these changes will allow us to devote more resources, both regular budget and extrabudgetary, to technical cooperation and capacity-building activities. Regular budget resources allocated to technical cooperation activities will be increased by nearly $100,000; and almost $800,000 of extra-budgetary
savings will be used to cover one-time costs in the initial year and additional technical cooperation activities in subsequent years.

Madame Chair,

Allow me to be clear: this is not a cost-saving exercise. It is an effort to exercise strategic and fiscal responsibility, by making the best possible use of the resources that we already have. We have carefully limited this proposal so that it does not result in budget increases.

But this is why getting best value from our resources is so important. It is why this proposal is the right thing to do if the international community wishes OHCHR to deliver the mandates it has defined for us, more efficiently, more effectively and more universally. This proposal will enable the High Commissioner to make the best possible use of existing resources, bringing the Office closer to Member States – increasing our capacity to support Member States in delivering on their human rights commitments.

We count on your continued attention and your support to help make this possible and we stand ready to provide any additional information or clarification that you might require.

Thank you.