The Permanent Missions of Afghanistan, South Africa and the United States to the United Nations, the Rule of Law Unit on behalf of the UN Rule of Law Coordination and Resource Group and the International Legal Foundation invite you to a discussion on:

“Enhancing Access to Legal Aid in Criminal Justice Systems”

13 November 2014 at 1.15 – 2.45 pm

Conference Room 8, UN Headquarters, New York

Introductory remarks

Mr. Edric Selous
Director, Rule of Law Unit, Executive Office of the Secretary-General

Panellists

Honorable Dunstan Mlambo
Judge President of the Gauteng Division of the High Court of South Africa and Chair of Board of Directors for Legal Aid South Africa

Ms. Lisa Foster
Director, Access to Justice Initiative, United States Department of Justice

H.E. Ambassador Zahir Tanin
Permanent Representative of Afghanistan to the United Nations

Discussant

Ms. Jennifer Smith
Executive Director, International Legal Foundation

Moderator

Ms. Simone Monasebian
Director, UNODC New York Office

Please see the attached concept note for further details.
This meeting will provide an opportunity for Member States to learn of recent developments in the area of legal aid, and share national experiences in the implementation of the United Nations Principles and Guidelines on Access to Legal Aid in Criminal Justice Systems. The meeting will also provide an opportunity for Member States to report on the implementation of the voluntary pledges on legal aid and access to justice made on the occasion of the High Level Meeting of the General Assembly on the Rule of Law at the National and International Levels in September 2012. While the meeting will focus on criminal legal aid, it will also provide an opportunity to address civil legal aid needs of the poor and vulnerable. Ample time will be reserved for discussion in order to encourage sharing of experiences, good practices, and knowledge.

This year, the General Assembly’s 6th Committee focused its discussion on the rule of law at the national and international levels on the topic of “Sharing States’ national practices in strengthening the rule of law through access to justice.” Access to justice and the rule of law at the national and international levels have also featured strongly in the ongoing discussions on the post-2015 development agenda, and are a central element in the preparations for the 13th UN Congress on Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice to be held in Doha in April 2015.

The provision of legal aid is a concrete way in which access to justice and the rule of law can be strengthened. The General Assembly adopted the United Nations Principles and Guidelines on Access to Legal Aid in Criminal Justice Systems (67/187) in December 2012. In so doing, the General Assembly affirmed that “legal aid is an essential element of a fair, humane and efficient criminal justice system that is based on the rule of law. It is the foundation for the enjoyment of other rights, including the right to a fair trial, and an important safeguard that ensures fundamental fairness and public trust in the criminal justice process.”

Additionally, in June 2014, over 250 national-level representatives, civil society members and experts from almost 70 Member States gathered in Johannesburg, South Africa, at the International Conference on Access to Legal Aid in Criminal Justice Systems. The participants discussed the critical importance and common challenges of providing access to effective legal aid services, and proposed practical and achievable solutions. The resulting Johannesburg Declaration on the Implementation of the United Nations Principles and Guidelines on Access to Legal Aid in Criminal Justice Systems notes the critical importance of effective legal aid and calls for support for the application of existing international standards and best practices. Action points included a decision to engage in international forums to advocate for the equal access to legal aid and a call to establish international and regional cooperation mechanisms.