

## Detroit's water shut-offs target the poor, vulnerable and African Americans

DETROIT / NEW YORK (20 October 2014) – The unprecedented scale of water shut-offs taking place in Detroit is disproportionately affecting the most vulnerable and poorest, most of whom are African American, two United Nations human rights experts have warned today. So far this year over 27,000 residences have had water services disconnected.

At the end of a three-day visit to Detroit\*, the UN Special Rapporteurs on the human right to water and sanitation, Catarina de Albuquerque, and on the right to adequate housing, Leilani Farha, stressed that all decisions that affect access to water and to adequate housing for residents of Detroit should be guided by human rights.

“It is contrary to human rights to disconnect water from people who simply do not have the means to pay their bills,” Ms. de Albuquerque said. “I heard testimonies from poor, African American residents of Detroit who were forced to make impossible choices – to pay the water bill or to pay their rent.”

The utility has passed on the increased costs of leakages due to an aging infrastructure onto all remaining residents by increasing water rates by 8.7 percent.

“This, combined with the decreased number of customers, and increased unemployment rate, has made water bills increasingly unaffordable to thousands of residents in Detroit living under the poverty line. In addition, repeated cases of gross errors on water bills have been reported, which are also used as a ground for disconnections. In practice, people have no means to prove the errors and hence the bills are impossible to challenge,” she added.

“Tenants and owners are living with such stress and uncertainty, fearing they won’t be able to pay their water bill and will eventually be evicted or suffer foreclosure,” Ms. Farha said. “Such situations go against internationally recognized human rights standards.”

The Special Rapporteurs noted that measures taken so far, including the Mayor’s 10 Point Plan, have not been of assistance to those who are chronically poor and face water shut-offs. More worryingly, the city has no data on how many people have been and are living without tap water, let alone information on age, disabilities, chronic illness, race or income level of the affected population.

In that regard, the experts called for the establishment of a mandatory federal water and sewerage affordability standard. In addition, they said, “special policies and tailored support for people in particularly vulnerable circumstances must be introduced.”

“The indignity suffered by people whose water was disconnected is unacceptable,” Ms. de Albuquerque stressed. “A woman whose water had been cut explained that her teenage daughters had to wash themselves with a bottle of water during menstruation, and had to refrain from flushing the toilet to save water.”

“I also listened to numerous stories of fear: mothers who fear losing their children because their water was shut off; heads of households who fear losing access to water without any prior notice; others who fear receiving unaffordable and arbitrary water bills,” the expert added.

“I heard repeated testimonies of people stating that they had been charged for the Detroit Water and Sewerage Department’s infrastructure deficiencies, including leakages, and also the utility’s lack of competence in dealing with errors in billing or requests for assistance,” Ms. Farha said.

“I am alarmed by the fact that many residents were not provided with any advance notice before their water was shut off and there seems to be no administrative or legal remedies for disputed bills and water disconnections,” she added.

“The City of Detroit should restore water connections to residents unable to pay and to vulnerable groups of people including persons with disabilities, the chronically ill, and households with small children”, stressed Ms. de Albuquerque.

“Every effort should be made by all levels of government to ensure that the most vulnerable are not evicted from or lose their housing as a result of water shut-offs or water bill arrears. Where an individual or family is rendered homeless due to water shut-offs, the city of Detroit must have in place emergency services to ensure alternate accommodation with running water is available”, stated Ms. Farha.

The Special Rapporteurs recalled that the United States is bound by international human rights law, including the right to life as well as the right to non-discrimination concerning housing, water and sanitation and the highest attainable standard of health.

“These obligations apply to all levels of Government – federal, state and municipal,” Ms. de Albuquerque and Ms. Farha underscored.

(\*) Check the full end-of-visit statement: (((((ADD LINK TO LONG STATEMENT HERE))))

ENDS ☺

**Catarina de Albuquerque** is the first UN Special Rapporteur on the right to safe drinking water and sanitation. She was appointed by the Human Rights Council in 2008. Ms. de Albuquerque is a Professor at the Law Faculties of the Universities of Braga, Coimbra and of the American University’s Washington College of Law. She is a senior legal advisor at the Prosecutor General’s Office. She was awarded the Human Rights Golden Medal by her country’s Parliament. Learn more, log on to:

<http://www.ohchr.org/EN/Issues/WaterAndSanitation/SRWater/Pages/SRWaterIndex.aspx>

**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 her function in June 2014. Ms. Farha is the Executive Director of the NGO Canada Without Poverty, based in Ottawa, Canada. 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. Learn more, log on to: <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/Issues/Housing/Pages/HousingIndex.aspx>

*The Special Rapporteurs are independent experts appointed by the United Nations Human Rights Council to monitor and promote the rights to adequate housing and to water and sanitation worldwide. The Rapporteurs are not United Nations staff, do not represent any government or institution, and receive no remuneration for their work. For more information check: <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/SP/Pages/Welcomepage.aspx>*

**For more information about the visit, please contact:**

**Madoka Saji** (mobile: +41 79 44 44 917 / [msaji@ohchr.org](mailto:msaji@ohchr.org)) and **Juana Sotomayor** (mobile: +41 78 77 60 371 / [jsotomayor@ohchr.org](mailto:jsotomayor@ohchr.org))

**For media inquiries** related to other UN independent experts:

Xabier Celaya, UN Human Rights – Media Unit (+ 41 22 917 9383 / [xcelaya@ohchr.org](mailto:xcelaya@ohchr.org))

**UN Human Rights, follow us on social media:**

**Facebook:** <https://www.facebook.com/unitednationshumanrights>

**Twitter:** <http://twitter.com/UNrightswire>

**Google+** [gplus.to/unitednationshumanrights](https://plus.google.com/unitednationshumanrights)

**YouTube:** <http://www.youtube.com/UNOHCHR>

**Storify:** <http://storify.com/UNrightswire>

**Check the Universal Human Rights Index:** <http://uhri.ohchr.org/en>