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Civil society furious over ministries' merger

By A Reporter

ISLAMABAD, Aug 1: Civil society representatives have expressed their concerns over the merger of Ministry of Human Rights with the Ministry of Law and Justice.

In a joint statement issued on Thursday, 15 civil society organisations including Child Rights Movement (CRM), Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP) and Insani Huqooq Ittehad (IHI) said the important subject of human rights would be relegated to a wing in the Ministry of Law and Justice which would give rise to a number of problems.

The Cabinet Division issued a notification on June 7 in which it had announced the merger of Ministry of Human Rights with the Ministry of Law and Justice.

After the merger, the new ministry would be called Ministry of Law, Justice and Human Rights, the notification said.

According to the statement of the civil society organisations, the mandates of the two ministries were in direct conflict to each other.

The Ministry of Law and Justice's mandate includes defending existing laws and representing the state in court cases pertaining to human rights (HR) violations, while the human rights ministry is supposed to redress grievances of victims and protect their rights and interests.

The constitution lays down principles of policy and fundamental human rights, protected and promoted through several articles.

In addition, Pakistan, as a member state of the United Nations (UN), accepts the UN charter and the Universal Declaration of

Human Rights; and is also a state party to several human rights conventions.

After the establishment of the Ministry of Human Rights, Pakistan secured membership of the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC). The merger will negatively affect Pakistan's image.

The statement further added that after the merger, both the National Assembly and Senate standing committees on human rights would stand dissolved. As a result, human rights issue would no longer be monitored by the parliament, and ultimately undermine the importance of HR and their violations.

The statement further said that after devolution the subject of women development was retained as a federal unit in the Ministry of Human Rights. But with the merger, women issues will lose priority and focus; as will rights of non-Muslim citizens, children and youth.

The Ministry of Law and Justice simply can neither handle the representational functions of the Ministry of Human Rights at the UN, European Union and other international forums, nor will it be able to respond to queries from foreign delegations visiting Pakistan, especially with reference to the current ongoing cases against state institutions in the Supreme Court and high courts, the statement added.

The non-government organisations have demanded immediate restoration of the Ministry of Human Rights as a separate and independent ministry, along with the appointment of a federal minister who is recognised and respected for his or her views, work and track record on human rights.