



**28 February 2017**

**Statement to the High Level Segment of the UN Human Rights Council 34<sup>th</sup> Regular Session by the Secretary-General of the Commonwealth, The Rt Hon Patricia Scotland QC**

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Mr President,

High Commissioner for Human Rights,

Excellencies, Distinguished Delegates...

This my first opportunity as Secretary-General of the Commonwealth to address the High Level Segment of the Human Rights Council, and it is an honour and privilege to do so.

Let me begin by congratulating His Excellency Joaquin Martelli on his election as President of the Council, of which nine Commonwealth countries are members.

We value our partnership with the OHCHR and the Group of Friends of SIDS - of which we are a member - to facilitate participation in the work of this Council by member states that do not have a permanent presence in Geneva through the Commonwealth Small States Office.

We aim to align our Commonwealth work on human rights with that of this Council, and to work in mutually supportive partnership.

Last week, the Permanent Representative of Malta facilitated an informal exchange of views among all Commonwealth Missions in Geneva on the Council's programme of work.

We commend Malta on taking this leadership as the current Commonwealth Chair-in-Office.

Mr President,

13 March is Commonwealth Day, and we embark on a year of celebrating 'A Peace-building Commonwealth'. Our focus for the whole month of March is on ending all forms of domestic violence, particularly the far-reaching social and economic impact of violence against women and girls. Unless there is peace in the home, there can never be peace in our communities.

This focus expresses our Commonwealth priority which is to leave no one behind and accelerate progress on gender equality and women's human rights as part of our efforts to implement the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. We therefore welcome the incorporation into this Council's programme of an annual full day of discussion on women's human rights.

We also welcome the UNSG's report last July on child, early and forced marriage (CEFM) in which a number of Commonwealth initiatives were highlighted, including the Kigali Declaration and our work with national human rights institutions, mobilizing traditional leaders, and young survivors.

Each year approximately 15 million girls are married before the age of eighteen. 8.8 million of these girls live in the Commonwealth.

Consensus on the need to prevent and eliminate this harmful traditional practice has been growing steadily, with Commonwealth Heads of

Government issuing strong commitments to this end at their meetings in 2011, 2013 and 2015.

Last October, we supported a member of Parliament and the Commonwealth Africa Parliamentary Human Rights Group to participate in the OHCHR expert meeting on CEFM.

He underscored the important role of parliamentarians as champions and advocates on the prevention and elimination of CEFM.

We look forward to convening with OHCHR a discussion on CEFM to coincide with the presentation of the outcomes from the expert meeting at the Council's 35<sup>th</sup> session.

Mr President,

In November 2015 in Malta, our Heads of Government recognised that freedom of opinion and expression, freedom of peaceful assembly and association, and freedom of religion or belief are cornerstones of democratic societies, and important for the enjoyment of all human rights, and are therefore fundamental to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals.

Violating these rights has a direct negative impact on the situation of human rights defenders and enjoyment of civil society space to voice dissent and to hold governments accountable. Therefore, we must acknowledge the crucial role both play and redouble our efforts to promote and protect them.

Mr President,

Discrimination has no place in the modern Commonwealth, yet sexual orientation and gender identity remains a highly sensitive subject in many of our member states.

Our work on this issue has focussed on strengthening the capabilities of national human rights institutions, parliaments and parliamentarians. We support a growing number of parliamentary champions engaging in national, regional and global advocacy on LGBTI equality. There is encouraging progress in several of our member states towards achieving equalisation under the law.

In this, and in other areas, the similarity of legislative systems and administration of the law in Commonwealth member states means we are able to work together to develop frameworks and models for legal reform to implement best practice in accordance with international standards.

Mr President,

We welcome the consensus resolution adopted last September on national human rights institutions, which underscored the unique role and contributions of NHRIs to the work of the United Nations, and in particular this Council and its mechanisms.

I am therefore pleased to report that the establishment, bringing into operation, and continual strengthening of national human rights institutions remains a strategic priority of the Commonwealth Secretariat.

In order to enhance the engagement of Commonwealth NHRIs with this Council and the UN system, we continue to support the work of the Commonwealth Forum of National Human Rights Institutions, which will hold its annual meeting next week in the margins of the Annual Conference of the Global Alliance of National Human Rights Institutions.

There is great scope for parliaments to contribute to the work of the Human Rights Council. The Commonwealth has made a substantive contribution to this end, including by facilitating the establishment of Commonwealth regional parliamentary human rights networks, supporting the strengthening of parliamentary human rights caucuses, and by contributing to the Council's first panel discussion in June 2013.

We welcome last June's follow-up panel discussion and support efforts to further enhance parliamentarians' contribution to the Council's work, including through exploration of guidelines or principles for parliamentarians in the promotion and protection of human rights.

Thank you for your very kind attention.