

## **Opening Statement**

**Commissioner Solomon Ayele Dersso, PhD**

**Chairperson of the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights**

Excellencies representatives of States Parties to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights;

Distinguished Representatives of African Union Bodies and Institutions;

Honourable colleagues, Members of the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights;

Representatives of National Human Rights Institutions;

Representatives of International, National and Civil Society Organisations;

Distinguished invited Guests and participants of this public session of the 28<sup>th</sup> Extraordinary Session of the African Commission;

Ladies and Gentlemen;

Good morning, good afternoon or good evening

Allow me to welcome you all to this virtual Session of the public segment of the 28<sup>th</sup> Extraordinary Session of the Commission. I hope that wherever you are joining us from today, you are safe and healthy. As we all know, we find ourselves in unprecedented times. The spread of the novel corona virus (COVID-19) on the Continent has led to major disruptions in how we live and work.

As you may all know, our plan was to have today's activity undertaken during the ordinary session of the Commission scheduled for April 2020 and to welcome the new members of the Commission in person at our venue for the session in Banjul, The Gambia. As part of the measures adopted to prevent the spread of COVID-19 and to protect participants and staff, the 66<sup>th</sup> Ordinary Session which was scheduled to take place in April of this year had to be postponed. Given the ongoing nature of the COVID-19 pandemic and the uncertainties as to when it would be possible to meet physically, the Commission felt that it convenes a session for welcoming the new commissioners and accordingly this 28<sup>th</sup> Extraordinary Session is convened virtually.

The mandate entrusted to the Commission is a noble and very weighty one. We are summoned to ensure the promotion and protection of the rights and freedoms guaranteed in the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights (African Charter), the most supreme instrument of the African human rights system. Ours is a mandate for giving voice to the voiceless, coming to the defence of those who could not find protection at the national level and strengthening the system of protection at the national level to ensure that the space for the enjoyment of human and peoples' rights is expanded. Ours is also a very onerous responsibility of working for realizing the ideals and values underpinning the African Charter enunciated in its preamble, namely freedom, equality, justice and dignity.

It is not just that the weight of our mandate is heavy, its nature noble and its ambition demanding and inspiring. What makes our role critical is also the fact that the need and demand for the promotion and protection of human and peoples' rights on our continent is enormous on account of the trinity of burdens weighing on our continent, the burden of history, the burden of mis-governance and the burden of unjust international power relations. Unfortunately, the means available at our disposal and the capacity of our institution are very limited and the context in which we operate is highly constrained. The weight and nobility of our mandate and enormity of the demand for human rights protection on our continent means that we have to work beyond the call of duty mustering all the energy, time and limited capacity. Even then, we always operate under the shadow of not being able to meet the expectations of many fellow Africans who knock on our doors seeking the delivery of the protection our Charter promised them.

Excellencies, honourable colleagues, ladies and gentlemen

The scale of the enormity of the need for the promotion and protection of the rights and freedoms guaranteed in the African Charter has been laid bare by the COVID19 pandemic. This need cuts across all categories of rights. Indeed, one of the most powerful lessons of the COVID19 pandemic is that we need the protection of human rights more in times of emergencies than in normal times. We need such protection not only from fear and hence from violence but also from the conditions that have stripped the masses of African people of their dignity on a daily basis and more so in times of emergencies such as COVID19. We

in particular need more protection from the conditions of want and the conditions of lack of access to water, sanitation, shelter, health care, education.

The nobility of our mandate and the enormity of the demand for the protection of the Charter rights also means that we have at all times bear in mind in whatever we do and we have to consider whether and how our actions or lack of it contributes to or undermines the cause of the African Charter, the promotion and protection of the Charter rights, which is the *raison d'être* for the existence of our Commission. Our pledge is to discharge the Commission's mandate with the utmost responsibility, dedication and resolve. Our pledge is to be catalysts for ensuring observance of the principles and standards of the African Charter. Our pledge is for ever expanding the scope of protection of the rights and freedoms in African Charter. Our pledge is for upholding the African Charter without fear or favour at all times and in all conditions. Our pledge as members of the Commission to exercise the utmost responsibility and wisdom to ensure that we are not found wanting in responding to the demand for protection of the Charter rights. Our pledge is to do everything for us not to fail in shouldering our responsibilities individually and collectively, to ensure that our actions or inaction does not stand on the way of the Commission exercising its authority and discharging its responsibility for promotion and protection of the rights enshrined in our Charter.

This we have to do strictly within the four corners of the African Charter. This we have to do with absolute respect of the trust bestowed on us to serve as guardians of the rights and freedoms guaranteed in the African Charter.

Only by living up to such standards can we come anywhere close to overcoming the institutional and capacity limitations we have and to achieve a degree of success in delivering on our mandate. We do not have the luxury or the choice to do otherwise but bind ourselves to and operate on the basis of such very high standards of responsibility and conduct.

As you clearly note from what I have said thus far, being elected into the African Commission is one of the highest honors for anyone who becomes a member of our Commission. Today's ceremony is an affirmation of and a testament to this fact. Our pledge is not only to the

African Commission but also to the African public, hence the importance of the execution of the solemn declaration of oath of office by the new members of our Commission.

Your Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

As alluded to earlier, the aim of this Extraordinary Session is to allow the incoming Members of the Commission to make the Solemn Declaration in terms of Article 38 of the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights, read together with Rule 10 of the Rules of Procedure. Second, this session is also an opportunity for the Commission to introduce its new Members to the public at large. Third, this session also serves to conduct the induction of new Members of the Commission.

As we welcome the new members of the Commission, I also wish to acknowledge the outgoing Commissioners, my predecessor former Chairperson of the Commission Commissioner Soyata Maiga, former Vice Chairperson Commissioner Lawrence Mute, Commissioner Lucy Asuagbor, and Commissioner Yeung YKJ Sik Yeun for their distinguished service as members of the African Commission. I wish each of them the best of luck in their future endeavours, and the next chapter in their work in advancing the noble cause of human rights on our continent.

I wish to extend a very warm word of welcome to the four newly elected Members of the Commission. I know I speak on behalf of all the Members of the Commission in congratulating you on your election, and in presenting our best wishes in this new role. I very much look forward to working together with you towards strengthening the promotion and protection of human and people' rights on the Continent and taking the Commission to a new height of progress in delivering on its mandate.

I thank you all for your kind attention!