

EU Special Representative for Human Rights, Mr. Eamon Gilmore

Remarks at Public Session of 68th Ordinary Session of the African Commission for Human and People's Rights

14 April 2021

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Hon. Mamadou Tangara, Minister of Foreign Affairs of The Gambia, H.E. Moussa Faki Mahamat, Chairperson of the African Union Commission, Honourable Justice Oré, President of the African Court on Human and Peoples' Rights, Hon. Ndayisenga Joseph, Chairperson of the African Committee of the Experts on the Rights and Welfare of the Child, Honourable Members of the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights, Honourable Judges, Representatives of the African National Human Rights Institutions, Representatives of UN Agencies, Representatives of civil society, Excellences, members of the Diplomatic Community, Ladies and Gentlemen.

It is a great honour to be with you today and to address the opening ceremony on this 68th session of the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights. This year is particularly special as we celebrate the 40th anniversary of the adoption of the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights.

The African Union and the European Union have a strong and long-standing relationship of peer-to-peer partnership and cooperation in human rights and democracy. We share the same values and we pursue a common goal, which is to ensure the enjoyment of all human rights by all, without discrimination of any kind. Our annual human rights dialogue is a concrete demonstration of the seriousness of our commitment to promote and protect human rights on both continents, and worldwide.

With the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, our daily work to promote and protect human rights has become significantly more challenging. The pandemic has amplified long-standing human rights concerns. We have seen states strengthening their surveillance power, reducing the civic and democratic space, harassing journalists and human rights defenders, restricting freedom of expression and freedom of press. We have also seen that violence against women, including domestic violence, has worsened. To protect life and health, we need to ensure many rights, including access to information, safe drinking water, food and adequate housing. That is why human rights must be kept at heart in the response to and recovery from the pandemic.

These issues were discussed at our Human Rights Dialogue in December 2020, which I had the pleasure, for the second time, to co-chair with Commissioner Samate. I particularly valued the participation of all AU human rights organs, specifically the African Commission for Human and People's Rights, has been critical to the success of the dialogue.

In November last year, all 27 Member States of the EU approved a new Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy for the period 2020 - 2024. The Action Plan is the new compass for the EU's policy with partner countries and regional organisations.

While this Action Plan is external in focus, it must be consistent with what we do at home. No country or region has a perfect record on human rights and democracy, including within the European Union.

The promotion and protection of human rights must always start at home. The Action Plan will be complemented by the new internal European Democracy Action Plan, as well as our new internal and external framework on gender equality, and of course the Rule of Law mechanism.

The new EU Global Human Rights Sanctions Regime is also reinforcing EU action in the field of human rights.

As the EU Special Representative for Human Rights, I have worked closely with the Special Representative for the Sahel and the Special Representative for Horn of Africa, to address the serious humanitarian and human rights situation in the Sahel and in the Tigray region in Ethiopia. The EU has called for respect for international human rights law and international humanitarian law, protection of civilians and humanitarian access. The EU has expressed concern for the lack of accountability and in this regard called for independent and impartial investigations into the alleged violations. The EU welcomes the decision of the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights to conduct an inquiry into alleged human rights abuses and violations in Tigray.

We all know that respecting human rights is not a political choice for countries or governments. It is a legal obligation rooted in international and regional human rights instruments, such as the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights. Let the 40th anniversary of the Charter be a year when renewed commitment to human rights is made and human rights are fully realised for all human beings, with no discrimination based on any ground, in Africa, in Europe and around the world.

We look forward to our continuing cooperation with the AU as we are at our strongest and most resilient when we work together.

Thank you for the honour of participating in your opening session and I wish you all the best for your important discussions in the coming days.