

**68<sup>th</sup> Session of the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights,  
14 April 2021**

**Video Statement by Ms. Michelle Bachelet, UN High Commissioner for  
Human Rights**

Honourable Chairperson,  
Honourable Commissioners,  
Distinguished delegates,

I am honoured to join you for the second time, and participate in this opening of this 68<sup>th</sup> session of the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights.

At the outset, allow me to express my deepest condolences for the recent and untimely passing (on 11 March 2021) of Honourable Commissioner Ndiame Gaye. May his soul rest in peace.

My Office continues to greatly value the partnership with the Commission – as is manifest in our joint Memorandum of Understanding. I am confident that we will continue, together, and through our respective mandates, in a complementary manner, to address ongoing and emerging thematic and country situations of mutual concern in Africa. We share the vision of the Agenda 2063: an Africa of good governance, democracy, respect for human rights, justice and the rule of law - for all without discrimination.

The past year has brought very particular global challenges to human rights protection for us all. As millions of lives have been lost resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic, my Office has also documented serious human rights violations resulting from the enforcement of COVID-19 restrictive measures, including arbitrary arrests and detentions, the excessive use of force and unlawful killings by law enforcement personnel and the military in some countries; restrictions on the rights to freedom of expression and peaceful assembly and association, resulting in a shrinking of civic space.

We have seen increased reports of sexual and gender-based violence, against women and girls, including domestic violence. The pandemic has also resulted in restrictions on the right to education, freedom of religion and belief, with the closure of

schools and places of worship, as well as loss of income opportunities and food insecurity for the region.

I recognize the dedication shown by the scientific and medical communities, and those funding scientific research, to fast-track the development of vaccines against the pandemic, but I continue to advocate for international solidarity towards a global, coordinated effort to ensure access to vaccines for everyone who needs it. This is line with the imperatives of Leaving No One Behind, equality and non-discrimination as the most effective, sustainable and response to the crisis, without undermining progress on Agendas 2030 and 2063.

Honourable Chairperson,

The African Union's theme for the year 2021 "Arts, Culture and Heritage: Levers for Building the Africa We Want", seems particularly poignant to the challenges that we face in the current pandemic. It offers an opportunity to embrace vast cultural richness of Africa and to reaffirm the fundamental role of the arts, culture and heritage in shaping democratic societies; and in building back better post-pandemic. It is critical to recognize the role of artists, of culture and of strong African heritage in inspiring society, in bringing people together, keeping them connected, and uplifting their spirits in times of isolation and lockdowns.

Equally, artistic and creative expression is a part of freedom of expression (as also enshrined in the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights), and must be protected against any form of pressure, intimidation or censorship, including during the current pandemic. Just as the rights of everyone to take part in cultural life without discrimination, and to artistic and scientific freedoms, are guaranteed by international law; the neglect, damage, falsification and destruction of cultural heritage, especially in times of crisis, affect human rights.

In order to achieve aspiration five of Agenda 2063, which envisions "an Africa with a strong cultural identity, common heritage shared values and ethics", it is important to harness the potential of Africa's cultural diversity: for combating climate change (emphasizing the positive potential of cultural rights to serve as critical tools in responding to the climate emergency. As outlined by the Human Rights Council's Special Rapporteur on cultural rights); for promoting gender equality (including the role of women as protectors of cultural heritage, and addressing cultural practices that may violate the rights of women and girls); for exploring the relationship between culture,

arts and new technologies; and for mobilizing African youth to design our cultural heritage of the future.

Discussions at two events held recently in the margins of this 68<sup>th</sup> session (namely, the Second National Human Rights Institutions Forum on “The role of NHRIs in promoting the realisation of indigenous women’s cultural rights in Africa”; and the NGO Forum on “The Africa We Want: The role of arts, culture and heritage in the realization of human rights and democracy”) will surely make important contributions for deepening your reflections on this year’s theme.

Allow me to conclude my brief remarks by congratulating you, under the able leadership of the Honourable Chairperson Solomon Ayele Dersso, and supported by the Secretariat, for your tireless efforts towards the promotion and protection of human rights as the leading continental organ with a mandate on human rights in Africa.

My Office stands in partnership with you in this noble endeavour.

I thank you for your attention and I wish you fruitful deliberations.