

## **AFRICA HUMAN RIGHTS DAY CELEBRATION: 21 OCTOBER 2020**

### **WELCOMING STATEMENT OF DR. SOLOMON DERSSO, CHAIRPERSON OF THE AFRICAN COMMISSION ON HUMAN AND PEOPLES' RIGHTS**

Africa Human Rights Day is commemorated on an annual basis on 21 October. This landmark commemoration marks the adoption in October 1981 of the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights, the founding treaty of the African Human Rights System.

This year the Africa Human Rights Day is celebrated in an extraordinary circumstance owing to the global COVID19 pandemic. COVID19 is a public health emergency.

The experience of many people across the continent also shows that COVID19 has also brought about huge human and peoples' rights consequences.

The pandemic has highlighted the pervasiveness of the socio-economic deprivations affecting the masses of our people. It has irrefutably established that the pervasive poverty and deepening inequalities that constitute the structural fragilities of our societies are attributable to these socio-economic deprivations - lack of access to health care, water, sanitation, food, decent housing, education and sustainable sources of livelihoods and gender oppression.

We have come to realize that under such conditions of deep structural weaknesses of our societies, the most widely used public health response measures could not be effectively implemented, without leaving the most vulnerable from the scope of these protection measures. How can someone with no access to drinking water comply with the public health call for handwashing? How can someone with no shelter comply with the public health requirement of staying at home? How can someone living in a highly congested space comply with the requirements of social-distancing? What difference does it make for someone with no regular income and food stockpiles if she dies from COVID19 or from hunger and starvation?

The pandemic has also accentuated the existing human rights problems characteristic of the poor system of governance in various parts of our continent. How else can we account for the fact that more people were killed by excessive use of force by members of law enforcement institutions of some of countries than by COVID19? How else can we account for the degeneration of sexual and gender-based violence into becoming the other pandemic within the COVID19 pandemic?

We continue to witness that we have serious problems of police brutality. The African Commission has expressed its concern about the use of excessive force by security forces in a number of countries such as Guinea and most recently Nigeria. The ACHPR

expresses its condemnation of the use of lethal force in the context of the protest against SARS in Nigeria which has led to the regrettable loss of lives. Nigeria has the ingenuity for addressing the expression of outrage by protestors about police brutality without directing violence against the youth and with due regard to the principles of use of minimum force as a last resort measure to avert imminent threat to life or bodily integrity, of proportionality, necessity and legality.

Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen

Many of these issues are matters to which we have not paid the level of attention required. They are neither matters that we sought to resolve with the urgency they deserve.

If countries on the continent are to succeed both in overcoming the severe impacts of the pandemic on the health, social and economic wellbeing of their people and in building back better, it is a pre-requisite that they start by addressing these fundamental human rights issues.

- Statement on elections in Africa during the COVID-19 pandemic, 22 July 2020
- Press Release on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on economic, social and cultural rights in Africa, 4 June 2020
- Africa: we must act now to avoid a catastrophe, say rights chiefs, 20 May 2020
- Press Release on the holding of general elections in Burundi in the context of the prevalence of the coronavirus Pandemic, 19 May 2020
- Press Statement on the human rights of mine workers and mining affected communities during COVID-19 pandemic in South Africa, 18 May 2020
- Press Release of the Special Rapporteur on Human Rights Defenders and Focal Point on Reprisals in Africa on the protection of human rights defenders during the COVID- 19 pandemic, 11 May 2020
- Press Statement on ACHPR letter submitted to the African Union chairperson H.E. President Cyril Ramaphosa on making human rights key pillar of the continental response to COVID-19, 7 May 2020
- Press Release of the Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Women in Africa on violations of women’s Press Release on the impact of the COVID-19 virus on indigenous/communities in Africa, 23 April 2020
- Press release of the Special Rapporteur on Prisons, Conditions of Detention and Policing in Africa on reports of excessive use of force by the police during COVID-19 pandemic, 22 April 2020
- Press Release of the Special Rapporteur on Prisons, Conditions of Detention and Policing in Africa on the release of prisoners during the COVID-19 pandemic, 17 April 2020

- Press Release by the Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Expression and Access to Information in Africa on the importance of access to the internet in responding to the COVID-19 pandemic, 8 April 2020
- Press Statement on human rights based effective response to the novel COVID-19 virus in Africa, 24 March 2020
- Press Statement on the coronavirus (Covid-19) crisis, 28 February 2020
- rights during the COVID-19 pandemic, 6 May 2020

This year's commemoration of Africa Human Rights Day serves as an important occasion to reflect on these and related issues. It presents us the opportunity to show not only why COVID19 is also essentially a human rights issue but also how human and peoples' rights provide us the path ways for 'building back better' in a way that makes our societies more resilient and less fragile. It is also an opportunity why human and peoples' rights are the foundation for achieving the ideal of Agenda 2063 and the sustainable development goals of 'leaving no one behind'.

As the African Commission on Human and peoples' Rights, African Union's premier human rights body, we are very delighted to have H. E. Dr. Mokgweetsi E.K. Masisi, President of the Republic of Botswana to deliver the key note address. We are also happy to have H.E. Moussa Faki Mahamat, the Chairperson of the AU Commission, to launch this high-level annual event. As an occasion for robust discussion of the most pressing human rights issues of our time, you should not miss joining this year's Africa Human Rights Day on Wednesday 21 October 2020.