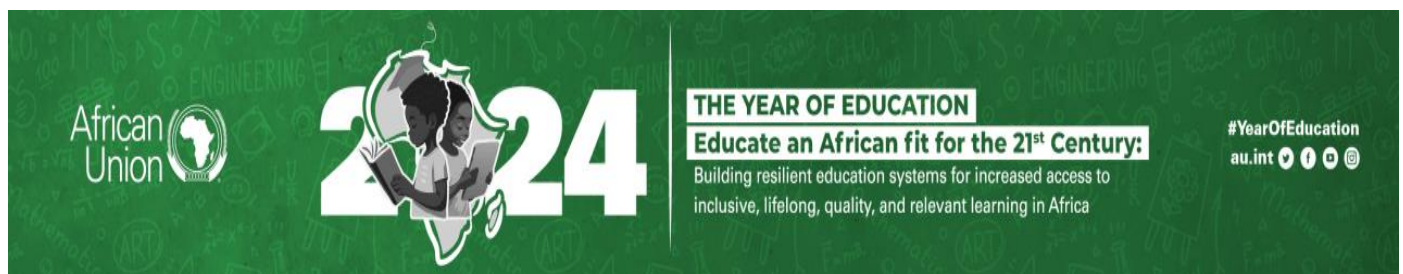




OPENING STATEMENT BY
H.E. MR. MOUSSA FAKI MAHAMAT
CHAIRPERSON OF THE AFRICAN UNION COMMISSION

**AT THE OPENING CEREMONY OF THE 81ST ORDINARY
SESSION OF THE AFRICAN COMMISSION ON HUMAN
AND PEOPLES' RIGHTS (ACHPR)**

October 17, 2024



- Excellency Dr. Mamadou Tangara, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of The Gambia,
- Honorable Commissioner Rémy Ngoy Lumbu, Chairperson of the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights;
- Honourable Judge Imani Aboud, President of the African Court on Human and Peoples' Rights;
- Excellency, Fortune Charumbira, President of the Pan African Parliament,
- Honourable Aver Gaver, Vice-Chairperson, African Committee of Experts on the Rights and Welfare of the Child,
- Mr. Marcel Akpovo, Regional Representative of the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights in East Africa and to the African Union, representing H.E. Mr. Volker Türk, United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights,
- H.E. Olof Skoog, European Union Special Representative for Human Rights,
- Honourable Commissioners of the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights,
- Excellencies, Distinguished Representatives of States Parties to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights,
- Representatives of National Human Rights Institutions,
- Representatives of United Nations Agencies,
- Representatives of civil society organizations and the media,
- Representatives and Staff of African Union institutions,

Distinguished guests,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is with great reverence and a profound sense of duty that I stand before you at this pivotal 81st Ordinary Session of the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights. Today's gathering is not just another moment in the calendar of our Union; it is a testament to our unwavering commitment to the core ideals upon which the African Union was founded—justice, equality, and the inviolable dignity of every African.

The African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights stands as a vital guardian of those ideals. Its mandate, entrusted by our predecessors in the African Charter, is to be the voice of the oppressed, the advocate of the voiceless, and the shield against the forces that threaten the freedom and dignity of our people. This Commission has been, and continues to be, a beacon of hope for millions across our continent who seek a life free from fear, persecution, and injustice.

As we open this session, we face the reality of a continent in flux – one where progress and challenge walk hand in hand. In the past year, we have seen inspiring advancements in democratic governance, but we are also confronted with grave setbacks in human rights. From conflicts and displacement to shrinking civic spaces and emerging threats to freedom of expression, our resolve has been tested. Yet, our belief in the African dream – a continent where

peace, prosperity, and human rights are the birthright of every citizen – remain unshaken.

This session of the ACHPR is not just a routine meeting; it is a call to action. The work you do here must address the evolving and complex human rights landscape of Africa. We must strengthen our mechanisms for accountability, deepen our collaboration with civil society, and ensure that human rights are the foundation upon which all other aspects of development and governance rest.

Let us use this moment not only to review what has been done but to reimagine what can be achieved. Our collective will, when galvanized, has the power to change the course of history. Together, we must continue the relentless pursuit of a continent where the rights of all people – regardless of their status, gender, ethnicity, or belief – are protected, respected, and realized.

Excellencies, Distinguished Delegates, Ladies and Gentlemen,

As we gather here today, we must acknowledge both the achievements and the challenges that lie ahead in the realm of human and peoples' rights across Africa. The African Union has made significant strides in consolidating peace, promoting good governance, and advancing social justice. However, we must be candid in recognizing that the landscape of human rights in our continent remains fraught with hurdles.

Over the past year, Africa has witnessed encouraging progress in some regions. We have seen peaceful transitions of power, greater efforts towards gender equality, and a rise in youth participation in civic and political life. These are

victories for all of us, for they reflect the aspirations we share in building a more inclusive and democratic Africa. Countries have taken steps to ratify key international human rights instruments, while others have created or strengthened national human rights institutions.

Yet, these advances coexist with persistent and emerging threats to the dignity and rights of our people. The specters of conflict, terrorism, and violent extremism continue to tear at the fabric of our societies, displacing millions and inflicting unimaginable suffering. In too many parts of our continent, armed groups operate with impunity, and civilians bear the brunt of their atrocities. This directly challenges the principles we have sworn to uphold.

Moreover, the COVID-19 pandemic, while receding, has left deep social and economic scars. It has exacerbated inequalities, widened the gap between the rich and poor, and pushed millions into poverty. It is often the most vulnerable—women, children, refugees, and the disabled—who are left behind, their rights and livelihoods undermined. As we work towards recovery, we must ensure that our responses are rooted in human rights principles, with a focus on equity and justice.

At the same time, the global economic downturn has placed immense strain on the ability of states to provide basic services, exacerbating tensions and, in some cases, leading to repression and violations of fundamental freedoms. We have seen an alarming rise in restrictions on freedom of expression, assembly, and the press. The very voices that advocate for human rights, transparency, and accountability are being silenced in too many places.

The digital age, while opening new avenues for economic growth and social connection, has also presented unique challenges for human rights. Online spaces, meant to foster dialogue and innovation, are increasingly used to spread hate speech, incite violence, and stifle dissent. Cyber surveillance, privacy violations, and the misuse of technology for political gain have become pressing issues that require our immediate attention.

In the midst of these challenges, we must not lose sight of one of the most transformative forces for human rights and sustainable development: Education.

The theme of the African Union for 2024, "**Educate and Skill Africa for the 21st Century**" reminds us of the central role that education plays not only in driving economic growth but also in safeguarding human dignity. Education is the foundation upon which a culture of human rights is built. It empowers individuals with the knowledge to claim their rights, fosters critical thinking, and cultivates a sense of shared responsibility within societies.

However, too many of our children are still denied access to quality education. Barriers such as poverty, gender discrimination, conflict, and outdated infrastructure hinder millions from realizing their potential. This is a human rights issue. Without education, we cannot hope to create the just, equitable, and prosperous Africa that we envision. It is through education that we can dismantle the systems of oppression, inequality, and injustice that hold our continent back.

The African Union's commitment to education must be reflected in our human rights agenda. We must work to ensure that every African child has access to inclusive, equitable, and quality education – one that prepares them not only for the workforce but also to be informed and engaged citizens. Our education systems must promote a culture of tolerance, respect for diversity, and awareness of human rights. It is through education that we will cultivate the next generation of African leaders – leaders who are committed to upholding the principles of freedom, justice, and equality.

The African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights has a critical role to play in this regard. By integrating education as a pillar of its human rights mandate, the Commission can help bridge the gap between human rights advocacy and practical, transformative change on the ground. We must empower our youth with the tools they need to build a future where human rights are not just aspirations but realities for all Africans.

However, the success of this Commission cannot rest on its shoulders alone. It demands the collective will of all African Union member states, civil society, regional bodies, and the private sector. Only through genuine partnership can we hope to confront these challenges head-on.

Excellencies, Distinguished Delegates, Ladies and Gentlemen,

The protection of human rights is not the sole responsibility of governments or institutions. It is a shared endeavor. Civil society organizations, activists, and the media must be empowered to play their vital role in holding governments

to account, advocating for justice, and supporting vulnerable communities. They must operate in an environment free from fear of reprisals or restrictions. The African Union recognizes the importance of these actors, and we are committed to deepening our engagement with them. We must create more spaces for dialogue and collaboration, ensuring that diverse voices – especially those of marginalized groups – are heard and reflected in our policies. We must also enhance our cooperation with international partners and human rights mechanisms, aligning our efforts with global standards while keeping the unique context of Africa in mind.

To truly advance the human rights agenda in Africa, we must be bold in our vision and relentless in our pursuit of justice. We must strengthen national human rights institutions, support the judiciary, and ensure that the rule of law is upheld at every level. We must create a culture of accountability, where those who violate human rights are brought to justice, and impunity is no longer tolerated.

In this regard, I call upon all African Union member states to recommit to the full implementation of the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights. Let us not forget that this document represents our shared values and aspirations for a peaceful, prosperous, and rights-respecting continent. Its principles must not only be words on paper but actions reflected in the lives of our people.

Excellencies, Distinguished Delegates, Ladies and Gentlemen,

As we embark on this session, I am confident that the discussions, resolutions, and actions that will emerge from this forum will bring us one step closer to

the Africa we all strive for – a continent united in its commitment to human dignity and justice.

Before I conclude, I would like to express my deep appreciation to the African Commission for its tireless efforts in safeguarding the rights of our citizens. Your work is invaluable, and your dedication is a testament to the values we hold dear as a continent. I also extend my gratitude to all our partners, both within Africa and internationally, who continue to support our collective mission for a just and equitable society.

Finally, let us leave here today with a renewed sense of purpose. The road ahead may be long and fraught with challenges, but together, we are stronger. Together, we can overcome the obstacles that stand in our way. Together, we can build a future where human rights are not just words, but lived realities for every African – regardless of their background, gender, or circumstance.

Let us continue this important work with courage, unity, and hope. The future of Africa depends on it.

I Thank you all.