

Speech (7-8 minutes)

Chairperson of the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights, Honourable Remy Ngoy Lumbu,

Esteemed Commissioners,

Excellences,

Ladies and Gentlemen!

It is a great privilege to be with you today and to address this opening ceremony of the 81th session of the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights. In the first days of January 2017 I happened to be the President of the UN Security Council. Here in the Gambia, elections had been held and the rightfully elected President blocked from acceding. Together, the African countries on the Council worked with us, the Europeans, to have the Security Council back up the new President. We achieved full backing from the other members, and I was able to call President Barrow – still in exile – to congratulate him, and to give him the full support of the UNSC. Since then the Gambia has consolidated democracy, its global support for accountability and human rights. Hosting the African Commission on Human and Peoples Rights is a testimony to this commitment. Regretfully, the UNSC is no longer united on such issues. So the need for Europe and Africa to work together to defend democracy and human rights is all the more important. That is why I wanted to be here today.

This is all the more important, now that our collaboration is steadily growing in the face of many challenges in the field of Human Rights, which affect your continent as well as ours.

Both the African Union, and the European Union were founded to foster peace and prosperity ng to our population. Human

Rights is at the core of this objective. It should be the compass by which we navigate our national policies and global engagements. Effective upholding of Human Rights stands with inclusion – without exceptions, and without discrimination. For that exact reason the convening of your Ordinary session is of utmost importance, as it brings together representatives of governments and civil society, national human rights institutions and experts, contributing together for this discussion and for progress.

Today, we find ourselves in a very difficult time in human history. Every crisis we face - economic, health, climate or conflict related - needs a collective effort to mitigate and resolve. And almost every crisis has underlying roots in the denial of human rights.

We deplore the loss of lives and the violations of international law, including international human-rights law and international humanitarian law wherever it occurs, in all situations and under any circumstances. It makes no difference whether it happens in Sudan, DRC, Ukraine, Israel/Gaza, Lebanon, Myanmar, or in any other conflict devastated corner of the world where the civilians pay the ultimate price for someone else's desire to wage wars. We are steadfast in our support for peace and an international order based on respect for established norms and legal obligations, and we see the African Union as an indispensable partner and ally in defending these universal principals. And that should include stronger efforts towards accountability. Conflicts lead to severe human rights violations. But lets not forget that it is usually violation of human rights that lead to conflict in the first place.

In these difficult times we need more than ever to stick together and build strong partnerships in order to protect the fundamental and universal rights of our people. Nationally, regionally and globally.

We have started preparations for the 20th jubilee edition of the EU-AU Human-Rights Dialogue, which is due to be held in Brussels in spring 2025. This annual Dialogue is a concrete demonstration of the seriousness of our mutual commitment to the common cause, namely to promote and protect human rights. Participation of this Commission (ACHPRs) is deemed of key importance to the success of the Dialogue. The work you do in supporting the AU and all its Member States and your role within the African Charter of Human and Peoples' Rights is a clear and very concrete manifestation of that commitment. I want to be clear, economic, social and cultural rights go hand in hand with political and civic rights. We are partners on all of them. And we need to relate to a ... of the agenda.

I just came from an interesting conference on climate change and human rights. Like the rights to development – it is highly relevant in Africa.

We have intensified our work on business and human rights. We share the ambition to ensure that the private sector applies human rights and sustainable practices in their supply chains. Last week, I had the honour to participate in the 3rd African BHR Forum together with ACHPR's Commissioner Hon. Dr. Litha Musyimi-Ogana. I informed the BHR Forum that the EU is readying itself to support the development of a new, pan-African/regional Responsible Business Conduct (RBC) and Business and Human Rights (BHR) programme as of 2025. The new African regional programme will seek to complement the

several projects already supported by the EU and implemented in many African countries. We will also explore the possibility to support the African Union with the implementation of the AU Business and Human Rights Policy. The acceleration of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) implementation is bound to have an impact on the human rights of all populations in the continent. The EU firmly supports the AfCFTA and we are committed to helping ensure that Human Rights will not be forgotten.

Another important element of our Dialogue is the contact with Civil Society, in a spirit of mutual trust and transparency. The engagement of Civil Society is key to all our human-rights work. This includes accreditation to Human-Rights Organs for organisations representing persons in vulnerable positions. Hence we commend the ACHPR for the central role it gives to Civil Society, and also for your openness to cooperate closely with National Human Rights Institutions and other Human-Rights organs working on the continent. We need to step up our support and do more to include and empower them, as they are the bridges between the governments and the people. Allow me to acknowledge their presence on the podium.

The European Union's relationship with Africa is one of strategic partnership with shared interests as well as geographical proximity. We cannot let our guards down. Holding each other's feet to the fire in order to live up to universal commitments and to avoid backsliding is what partners do. We would continue to raise issues of mutual concern, including with regard the growing intolerance, racism, restrictive legislation against minorities – ethnic, religious or

sexual. We will continue to advocate against the death penalty and discriminatory laws, incl. on female genital mutilation.

But the main take away needs to be a positive and optimistic one. We have made huge advances together to advance the dignity and rights of our people and leaving no one behind. Let's step up through that momentum going on an ever closer collaboration bilaterally and on the world stage, as we strive to reach the SDGs and fulfil the Pact of the Future.

Thank you for the honour of participating in your opening session. On behalf of the European Union, I wish you all the best for your deliberations in this 81th ordinary session of the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights.

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