

Commonwealth Secretary-General Statement to Human Rights Council

Mr President, distinguished delegates,

I am honoured to represent the Commonwealth at this eminent Council.

Our family of 54 nations – home to more than 2.5 billion people, 60 per cent of whom are under the age of 30 – is bound by history, tradition and shared values.

Human rights are enshrined in our Charter – both as a central obligation, and as a cornerstone of our wider commitment to peace, democracy and championing the most vulnerable.

I can say with my hand on my heart, that our devotion to human rights is more than an abstract pledge.

It is alive in our work – and our determination for the Commonwealth to be a force for good in the world.

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Because human rights put people front and centre – compelling us to consider the most vulnerable; and focus our efforts on those who are suffering most.

A year ago, when I addressed this Council, I described the pandemic as a human rights emergency.

This has been borne out **directly**: in the threat to life, health and livelihoods.

And it has been borne out more broadly:

- In the exacerbation of existing vulnerabilities and inequalities.
- In new forms of exclusion

- And in the intensification of exposure to harm or violence, especially amongst women, girls and marginalised groups.

The reality is that every kind of global emergency is a human rights emergency.

And it follows that human rights must be at the heart both of our immediate response – and at the heart of our long-term efforts to build back better, stronger, fairer and more resilient.

For the pandemic, that means:

- Urgent action to ensure equitable access to vaccines across the world, as the fastest way out of the acute phase of the crisis.

- And it means long-term support for all nations to build strong, resilient, high quality health services to which everyone has access

This focus is at the heart of the Memorandum of Understanding signed last month between the Commonwealth Secretariat and the World Health Organisation.

By working together, we can deliver more for our member states.

For the climate emergency, it means a commitment to a rights-based response.

I highly commend this Council for adopting the resolution recognising the right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment.

The task now is to follow this with concrete action. In this, you will always find a willing partner in me, and the whole Commonwealth Secretariat.

And it means we need to scale up our commitment to tackling the ongoing emergency of Violence Against Women And Girls

I have called this the hidden pandemic.

It is an intolerable fact that one in three women globally will experience physical or sexual violence in their lifetime – with

calls to available helplines increasing five-fold during the pandemic.

So I invite everybody, within and beyond our family of nations, to join our Commonwealth Says No More Campaign.

This flagship campaign is a unique platform linking government, business, civil society and citizens – in a bid to end domestic and sexual violence once and for all.

Cutting across all of our work – from COVID, to climate change and tackling violence – is a commitment to the Sustainable Development Goals.

If the Universal Declaration of Human Rights is the common destination, the SDGs are the roadmap.

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That is why SDG implementation is such a central focus for our Human Rights Unit, as well as the whole Commonwealth Secretariat.

Much of our commitment to human rights comes alive in the work of our Small States Office here in Geneva. And I thank the Commissioner for our continued close partnership.

32 of the world's 42 small states are in the Commonwealth.

Our support for them is both principled and practical.

I champion small states everywhere I go because I have the duty and mandate to do so.

And the moral, political and economic imperative to help small states is a central motivation for me as Secretary-General

But I fiercely believe that centralising the needs of small states helps everybody.

Addressing our greatest vulnerabilities strengthens the whole.

Strengthening the whole enables every nation, every community, in every part of our world, to be more peaceful, more secure, happier, healthier and more prosperous.

And, Mr President, the pandemic has reminded us just how important – and how fragile – security, health and prosperity can be.

This belief, and this spirit, will guide me – and the whole Secretariat – as we look forward to the forthcoming

Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting in Kigali in June.

And I hope it can guide all of us in every setting to bring human rights alive – with the most vulnerable at the heart of our approach.

Not just when it is easy, but when it is hard.

Because it is in these moments, when the human spirit is truly tested.

Thank you.