

REPUBLIC OF RWANDA



MINISTRY OF JUSTICE

**OPENING REMARKS BY THE MINISTER OF JUSTICE AND ATTORNEY
GENERAL DURING STAKEHOLDERS' DIALOGUE ON RWANDA'S 4TH UPR
CYCLE**

HELD VIRTUALLY VIA WEBEX, APRIL 20, 2021

**Excellencies Ambassadors;
Resident Coordinator of ONE UN/Rwanda;
Distinguished representatives of UN agencies;
Distinguished representatives of the Diplomatic Community;
Distinguished representatives of Government Institutions;
Distinguished representatives of International Organizations;
Members of Rwanda Civil Society;
Ladies and Gentlemen.
Good morning!**

Let me first take this opportunity to sincerely thank you for honouring our invitation and being with us in this virtual meeting. Unfortunately, because of the current COVID-19 crisis, we have been unable to meet face to face in a long time. I am however happy to see the familiar faces we have missed and welcome the new colleagues who are participating in the UPR process for the first time.

Thank you, RC, Honourable Ndiaye, for your remarks and invaluable support that the OneUN family in Rwanda has always demonstrated in the country's development in general and the advancement of human rights in particular.

Distinguished participants,

Every time we get the opportunity to meet in this kind of gathering, we brief each other on the journey Rwanda has undertaken in the UPR process.

I know that most of us in this meeting have a good understanding of what the UPR is and its goal. However, for the benefit of colleagues who are joining us for the first time, let me briefly note that the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) is a mechanism created by the UN General Assembly in 2006 and is carried out by an intergovernmental working group of the Human Rights Council.

The objective of the UPR is to review the fulfillment of the human rights commitments and obligations of all 193 UN member states and provide an opportunity for all States to declare what actions have been taken to improve the human rights situations in their countries and to overcome challenges to the enjoyment of human rights.

The ultimate goal of UPR is the improvement of the human rights situation in every country with significant consequences for people around the globe. It is designed to prompt, support, and expand the promotion and protection of human rights on the ground.

The Government of Rwanda acknowledges and supports the above-mentioned ideals and rationale of the UPR mechanism.

The UPR is set up in 4.5-year cycles, so that States' human rights records will be continuously reviewed. Based on this periodicity, Rwanda has undergone three reviews: the first in 2011, the second in 2015 and the third which is the most recent one, in January 2021.

Dear colleagues,

As I just alluded to above, Rwanda was reviewed for the third time on 25th January 2021. The review was also a collaborative effort as it has been the case in the rest of the process. Most of your institutions were with us as we prepared for the review and on the day of the review itself. We felt your support and your contribution was important to the outcome of the review.

We also appreciate the interest that stakeholders in the UPR have been demonstrating in engaging the Ministry of Justice wanting to know the final outcome of the review and what would be the next steps. This testifies to their existing commitment and readiness to embark on the implementation phase. We greatly appreciate it.

Regarding the outcome of the last review, as you may probably be aware, Rwanda received a total of 284 recommendations from 99 delegates from Member states. Among these recommendations Rwanda supported 160, noted 75 and 49 did not enjoy the support of Rwanda. On this particular point, allow me to also clarify that the 75 recommendations that were noted will still be implemented but will not be part of the commitments we undertook. Our approach as always is that UPR is about people, the rights of our people. So irrespective of what we support or not support, our reasons should always be understood clearly. No rights of Rwandans, that are legal and relevant will not be honoured and respected in accordance with our Constitution and other laws. And again, we will be together, all stakeholders, we want them to keep expanding.

This review left us with a renewed commitment to further reinforce the promotion, protection and respect of human rights, which is a commitment

founded in the Rwandans' Constitutional pledge to build a State governed by the rule of law, based on the respect for human rights, freedom and on the principle of equality of all Rwandans before the law as well as equality between men and women.

**Distinguished Participants;
Colleagues.**

We have now entered into a new UPR cycle. In fact, we are three months down the road. For the next 5 years, we will be working together to fulfill and implement these recommendations to continue improving the human rights situations of all Rwandans.

During the current cycle, we have committed to far more recommendations than we did in the last review. Indeed, some recommendations are similar or are the in the same category and as such they can be implemented by the same actions. In addition, no single recommendation is entirely new. Most of them are already part of the country's commitment and in the focus of different institutions. I am sure non-state actors can also find their niche in one or more recommendations. So, we are not starting from zero.

That being said, this does not mean that we have, or we intend to reduce the 160 recommendations to 50 as we had in 2015 or fewer than that. No. They remain 160 recommendations. We will give each and every one of them due consideration in the planning phase, implementation phase, monitoring phase and reporting phase. This means that more is required from us.

We understand that the implementation of the recommendations is the primary responsibility of the State. However, one may not ignore the crucial role that other stakeholders such as Rwanda Civil Society, International Non-Governmental Organizations working in Rwanda and Development Partners play in the implementation process. We look forward to your contributions on the way forward particularly with regard to strategies on how to effectively implement these new recommendations.

Ladies & gentlemen,

As it was indicated in the note of this event, this half-day gathering will be followed by a four-day retreat to develop the roadmap of the implementation of these recommendations. As we speak, a dedicated team of 30 people is participating on this dialogue remotely from Musanze where they are going to spend 4 days working on the roadmap. They are members of the Treaty Body Reporting Task Force which is a loose structure composed by representatives from the government institutions and non-state actors.

Permit to sincerely appreciate your respective institutions for allowing your staff to spend this whole week away from the office. I know some tasks will be put on hold. To the team in Musanze, I also want to thank you for responding positively to our invitation and accepting to dedicate your time and expertise to this important task. We count on you and look forward to the document that you will produce.

We would have loved to have more people at the retreat to ensure more inclusiveness and representation, but we were limited by COVID-19 regulations. However, we want to assure you that everyone who is interested will have an opportunity to contribute to the roadmap. Once the draft is available, it will be shared to all of us for comments and inputs before it is validated and finally adopted.

Before I move from this point, let me say a word to our team in Musanze. I am aware that before you attended the retreat you took COVID-19 tests, and a negative result was required before departure. I urge you, while there, to observe all measures to prevent the spread of COVID-19 to make sure you come back safely.

Distinguished participants,

Colleagues and friends,

Before I conclude allow me to make a few points that I think are the takes from the last review and from which we could draw some lessons for the current cycle. During the last review we noted these among other things:

- ❖ There was a strong collaboration among stakeholders right from the beginning of the 2nd cycle.
- ❖ Together we ensured that the process was open and inclusive of all stakeholders;
- ❖ The national report was made available to all stakeholders for their comments and inputs from the first draft until it was validated;
- ❖ The 2nd cycle approach reversed the 2011 experience where most of the stakeholders had adopted an individualistic and confrontational approach. Most of them preferring to go underground and keep the government in the dark about what they were doing, simply aiming at Geneva review and
- ❖ The national process, particularly, stakeholders' gatherings provided a great platform for stakeholders to engage in a human rights discourse.

On one side, as we begin a new cycle, I would wish to request that the above takes be considered only as a baseline and aim to do and achieve much more during the current cycle.

On the other side, we cannot forget that the COVID-19 pandemic befell the world towards the end of 2019. The pandemic reached Rwanda in March 2020 when we were in the middle of the reporting phase. So, the presence of COVID-19 and its challenges in the reporting process showed us that State reporting work should consider the use of technology as the matter of priority.

In addition to the above, it was noted that few organizations (local and non-local) are still choosing to keep the government in the dark about what they are doing. For these organizations, I want to remind them that UPR aims at bringing changes in the lives of ordinary people in Rwanda. Dialogue should be held,

here, issues raised here, and solutions found together here and not in Geneva. In this regard, I wish to reiterate the Ministry of Justice' commitment and readiness to constructively engage with any stakeholders on any issues pertaining to the advancement of human rights in Rwanda.

Dear Participants,

In conclusion, I wish to reiterate the Government of Rwanda's commitment in protecting and advancing human rights. We have demonstrated, whenever the opportunity presented itself, that we legislate for and deliver on our human rights commitments as obligations the Government owes its citizens. We assure you that following up on the implementation of the recommendations remains a priority at the Ministry and we will continue to keep this process open and inclusive.

Needless to say, this process has been a learning tool for us as Rwandans, providing an opportunity for self-reflection and dialogue. We are grateful to all, collective or individual, who engage with us, whenever the opportunity arises, on human rights issues. I particularly thank the UNDP for both its technical and financial support in the UPR process.

I therefore invite and welcome your contributions on the way forward particularly with regard to strategies on how to effectively implement the recommendations we accepted.

I thank you.