OPENING STATEMENT BY: HIS EXCELLENCY, MR. ADAMA BARROW
PRESIDENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF THE GAMBIA

AT THE

61ST ORDINARY SESSION OF THE AFRICAN COMMISSION ON HUMAN AND PEOPLES’ RIGHTS
AND THE
30TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE ESTABLISHMENT OF THE AFRICAN COMMISSION ON HUMAN AND PEOPLES’ RIGHTS.

1ST NOVEMBER, 2017
AT THE KAIRABA BEACH HOTEL
BANJUL, THE GAMBIA
Your Excellencies,

Honourable members of the African Commission on Human and Peoples’ Rights;

Excellencies, Members of the Diplomatic and Consular Corps;

Distinguished Delegates of African Union Member States;

Distinguished Representatives of National Human Rights Institutions;

Distinguished Representatives of Non-Governmental and Civil Society Organisations;

Members of the Press;

Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen;

On behalf of the Government and People of The Gambia, and on my own behalf, I welcome you all to this historic opening ceremony of the 61st Ordinary Session of the African Commission on Human and Peoples’ Rights which also coincides with the 30th anniversary of the establishment of the Commission. The Government of The Gambia is delighted to host this celebratory session.

It is without doubt that the Commission has for the past 30 years been working tirelessly towards the promotion and protection of human rights on the continent and I wish to recognize its excellent contributions and achievements in this regard. The establishment of the Commission was and continues to be a source of immense pride and hope for Africa and her peoples and in particular The Gambia as the host State.

Madam Chairperson, the people of The Gambia recognise the commitment and support of the African Commission in ensuring
that human rights are protected in The Gambia despite the uncooperative attitude of the former government. The Commission never shied away from carrying out its mandate even when it seemed impossible to do so in The Gambia and for this we will remain eternally grateful.

Madam Chairperson, allow me to also recognise and acknowledge the tremendous contributions of regional and international human rights organisations, human rights defenders and NGOs, who have worked tirelessly over the years to ensure that the plight of the people of The Gambia remained on the regional and global political agenda. Thanks to their efforts, the people of this country were not forgotten by the international community.

Excellencies, Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen,

You will agree with me that the African Continent has come a long way since the inception of the Banjul Charter. Although there have been many obstacles along the way, there have also been numerous achievements and milestones.

Since the establishment of the Commission, African States have made great strides in the promotion and protection of human rights in their respective countries through the adoption of laws and policies in fulfilment of their human rights obligations under the Charter. Although the level and extent of human rights protection varies from State to State, the commitment to advancing human rights is steadily gaining ground throughout the continent.

The Sessions of the Commission are therefore an important mechanism for all stakeholders to carry out an objective assessment of the levels of implementation of our individual obligations under the African Charter.
Excellences, Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen.

On the home front, the Government of The Gambia has enacted numerous laws aimed at the protection and promotion of Human Rights. Most recently on the margins of the United Nations General Assembly, I signed five international treaties including the Optional Protocol to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights on the Abolition of the Death Penalty, and the Convention Against Enforced Disappearances. In the next few months, we intend to ratify many human rights related treaties including the Convention Against Torture. One of the key reforms of my administration is the adoption of a new republican constitution within the shortest time possible. Existing constitutional provisions on protection of human rights shall be strengthened in the new constitutional order.

However, it is important to note that human rights protection must not only be about enacting laws on paper. Concrete steps must be taken realization through the creation of institutions, policies and programmes for the full realisation and enjoyment of these rights.

Madam Chairperson, cognizant of the fact that Human Rights are indivisible, inalienable, interrelated and interdependent, my Government has been working steadily and steadfastly towards improving and enhancing the lives of our citizens and ensuring that our obligations under the African Charter are fulfilled. My government has resolved to improving the country’s legal and institutional environment and to align the entire governance architecture with international justice and human rights standards.

To this end, my government will soon produce a National Development Plan for the period 2018 to 2021 which will serve as
a blueprint for the realisation of our goals in various areas, including Security Sector Reform, administration of Justice, the health sector, education, empowerment of women, youths, and addressing children’s issues.

We are focused on rebuilding a broken nation, and to lay the foundation of an administration of justice system in the country capable of sustaining our democracy, and at the same time deal with the past in a constructive manner. As part of our transitional justice project, we are in the process of establishing a Truth, Reconciliation and Reparations Commission which will document the widespread human rights violations of the previous Government with a view to establishing an impartial historical record of the truth, foster social cohesion and encourage national reconciliation, to address impunity, and to recognize the rights and dignity of victims through the provision of appropriate reparations to ensure the country is able to move forward.

Madam Chairperson, I am proud to inform you that since the installation of my Government at the beginning of the year, a total number of 334 prisoners have now been released from prisons and other detention centres around the country including all political prisoners or prisoners of conscience. 241 pending criminal cases involving 304 accused persons were reviewed; prosecutions in 36 cases involving 86 accused persons were discontinued on the basis of insufficient evidence. Currently, there are fewer people held in remand awaiting trial or the conclusion of trial. Prisoners with medically certified mental disabilities have now been transferred from prisons to a psychiatric hospital for appropriate treatment.

There has been an appreciable shift in the public space on the exercise of the right to freedom of speech and the media. Presently, we are working closely with international human rights organisations for the total overhaul of the media laws to remove
all repressive provisions that stifle the fundamental right to freedom of Expression and opinion. Additionally, all censorship of the private and public media has been removed.

My government also recognises the need for the establishment of a National Human Rights Commission which has been delayed over the past few years. Efforts are currently underway to finalize the bill for the establishment of a National Human Rights Commission in compliance with the Paris Principles for the first time in the history of this country.

**Madam Chairperson**, my Government is aware of the obligation of The Gambia under the “Host State Agreement” to construct a permanent structure to house the Secretariat of the African Commission on Human and Peoples’ Rights. Consequently, the Ministry of Justice, in consultation with the Secretariat of the Commission, has constituted a taskforce comprising all stakeholders mandated, among other things, with fund raising for the construction of the said Secretariat.

We will be making a Declaration pursuant to Article 34(6) of the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples’ Rights on the establishment of an African Court on Human and Peoples’ Rights to allow individuals and NGOs to have direct access to the Court.

The Government is equally conscious of its other treaty obligations including the timely submission of reports to the Commission under the Charter.

**Madam Chairperson**, the African dream that gave life to the establishment of the Commission 30 years ago is much alive today as it was then. I wish to reiterate the total commitment of the Government of The Gambia to the African Commission and
its ideals. We stand ready and willing to work with you to champion the cause of respect for and protection of human rights of all peoples on the African continent. We call upon all States on the continent to give their full support to the Commission.

Madam Chairperson, I am certain that this session would open the platform for fruitful deliberations to assess and take stock of our achievements and challenges in the last 30 years.

I extend my appreciation to you all for traveling from far and wide to attend this celebratory session and whist wishing you fruitful deliberations, it is my fervent hope that you will take time to explore and enjoy our smiling coast during your stay.

Finally, I extend my appreciation to you the outgoing Commissioners: to you Madam Chairperson, Honourable Pansy Tlakula, for your services to the Commission over the years and especially for steering the affairs of the Commission for the past two years; and to Honourable Commissioners Reine Alapini—Gansou and Med S.K. Kaggwa for your services to the Commission over the years. We acknowledge your immense contributions, individually and collectively, to the promotion and protection of human rights in our continent and I am optimistic that your successors will continue the good work that you have all carried out during your respective tenures.

On that note, Your Excellencies, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen it is my singular honour and privilege to declare this 61st Ordinary Session of the African Commission on Human and Peoples’ Rights officially open!

I thank you all for your kind attention.