STATEMENT BY
H.E. DR NKOSAZANA DLAMINI-ZUMA
CHAIRPERSON OF THE AFRICAN UNION COMMISSION

DELIVERED BY
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AT

THE OPENING CEREMONY OF THE 59TH ORDINARY SESSION
OF THE AFRICAN COMMISSION ON HUMAN AND PEOPLES’ RIGHTS
(ACHPR)

BANJUL, THE ISLAMIC REPUBLIC OF THE GAMBIA
21 OCTOBER 2016
Your Excellency, Justice Mama Fatima Singhateh, Attorney General and Minister of Justice of the Islamic Republic of The Gambia

Honourable Adv. Faith Pansy Tlakula, Chairperson of the African Commission on Human and Peoples’ Rights

Honourable Mr. Joseph Ndayisenga, Second Vice Chairperson of the African Committee of Experts on the Rights and Welfare of the Child


Honourable Justice Sylvain Ore, President of the African Court on Human and Peoples’ Rights

Honourable Mr. Joseph Chelingi, Presiding Officer of ECOSOCC

Your Excellencies, Ministers and Heads of Delegation, Delegates of States Parties to the African Charter on Human and Peoples’ Rights

Your Excellencies, Ambassadors and Members of the Diplomatic Corps

Representatives of the African National Human Rights Institutions

Representatives of the UN Agencies

Representatives of the Civil Society and Non-Governmental Organizations

Distinguished Guests

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I feel greatly honoured and privileged to be afforded the opportunity to address this august assembly on behalf of H.E. Dr Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma, Chairperson of the African Union Commission, on this auspicious occasion of the 59th Session of the African Commission on Human and Peoples’ Rights.

First and foremost, allow me to express on behalf of the African Union Commission, our heartfelt appreciation to the Government and the people of the Islamic Republic of The Gambia, the Smiling Coast of Africa, for the warm hospitality accorded to me and my delegation since our arrival in this beautiful city of Banjul. I also commend the leadership
and commitment of Islamic Republic of The Gambia to the African Union Human Rights Agenda. I salute The Gambia for the continued support to the African Union as clearly demonstrated by hosting the headquarters of African Commission and this particular Session of the Commission.

Let me also from the onset, congratulate you, Madam Chairperson of the Commission, Hon. Advocate Pansy Tlakula together with your team of Honourable Commissioners of the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights for the diligent manner in which this 59th Ordinary Session has been organized. I also wish to congratulate Mr. Joseph Ndayisenga, Second Vice Chairperson of the African Committee of Experts on the Rights and Welfare of the Child and the Honourable Commissioners for bring their 28th Ordinary Session to Banjul to join hands in hands with the ACHPR. The deliberations and the outcomes of this Joint Session will go a long way in enhancing the effectiveness and efficiency of the Human and Peoples' Rights System in Africa.

At this juncture, I would also like to recognize and thank members of the Secretariat of the African Commission on Human and Peoples’ Rights as well as the African Committee of Experts on the Rights and Welfare of the Child for their hard work and for being the catalyst for the effectiveness of the Commission and the Committee. I also extend my gratitude to all the delegates and participants for making the time in between your busy schedules to attend this historic session taking place during a year declared by the AU policy organs as the Africa Year of Human Rights with particular Focus on the Rights of Women.

The vision of a peaceful, united and prosperous Africa set out in Agenda 2063 can be achieved through sound planning and results-oriented policies and actions. Agenda 2063 has been adopted by our Heads of State and Government as the Continent’s new long-term vision for the next 50 years. The realization of our common vision of a united and prosperous Africa anchored on a culture of human rights as envisaged by Agenda 2063 requires our common resolve. Our gathering here today is evidence of our collective dedication and commitment to this goal.

**Excellencies, Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen**
The African Human Rights system is structured in such a way that it protects human and the collective rights of people. Whereas civil and political rights remain a challenge in Africa, by far the biggest challenge relates to the promotion and protection of the second generational rights (socio-economic and cultural rights). These requires us to focus our eyes on how best to advance rights that address underdevelopment, poverty, inequality, marginalisation and exclusion on our continent as we make concerted efforts towards effective implementation of Agenda 2063: The Africa We Want. Beyond pursuing our noble agenda for greater enjoyment of civil rights and political liberties, we have redouble our efforts to ensure that African people enjoy the right to food, the right to safe water and sanitation, the right to housing, the right to education, the right to health, the right to decent clothing, the right to clean environment etc. These are the basic requirement for a decent standard of living even before we can think of the right to vote. How on earth can an elderly woman who is impoverished and living in a remote rural area feel compelled to take a long journey to a polling station on an empty stomach and cast her ballot in an election? I am posing this question simply to make the point that socio-economic rights are as important as the political rights. In order to promote gender equality as we advance these socio-economic rights, we need to make deliberate efforts to empower African women socio-culturally, politically and economically.

The African continent has witnessed decades of numerous human rights challenges resulting from a diverse range of factors, which include, among others, war, poverty, corruption, autocratic governance and exclusion of women. It is against this background that the AU Member States of the then Organization of African Unity (OAU), solemnly resolved to promote and safeguard freedom, justice, equality and human dignity in Africa by putting in place instruments and mechanisms to enforce these values.

The African Charter on Human and Peoples’ Rights (ACHPR) was adopted by the OAU on 27 June 1981 and it entered into force on 21 October 1986. This instrument represents the foundational stone of the African Human Rights System. It is unique to other regional human rights instruments in that it covers internationally accepted human rights standards while also recognizing unique African values peculiar to our continent. The Charter also provides for Civil and Political Rights, Social, Economic and Cultural Rights, Peoples’ and
Group Rights and all these include duties and responsibilities of the individual in the society.

This 59th Ordinary Session is taking place today 21 October 2016 as we commemorate the Africa Human Rights Day under the theme “Women's Rights - Our Collective Responsibility” The Commemoration of the Africa Human Rights Day marks a continental effort to reflect and recommit to the solemn undertaking by our leaders to promote and safeguard human and peoples’ rights in Africa.

Excellencies, Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen

I would like to remind of the Decision of the AU Summit in January 2011 to establish a Pan-African Governance Architecture and its Platform to support Member States in their efforts to promote democratic governance, constitutionalism and rule of law, democratic elections and human rights at the national level. The Platform presents a framework through which many of the stakeholders on governance, democracy and human rights will influence the process of facilitating accession to and ratification of AU instruments. The AGA Platform also facilitates domestication, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of the AU norms on shared values on democracy, human rights and governance.

The Human Rights and Transitional Justice Cluster of the AGA Platform provides a unique opportunity to strengthen capacity and deepen our understanding of issues of human and peoples’ rights, democracy and governance, which constitute our African Shared Values. We are happy to announce that the Platform has been fully operationalised within the AUC where its Secretariat is located. Each one of us present here is invited to engage with the Human Rights Cluster and to contribute to the Platform’s objectives of greater synergy, coordination and cooperation among African Union organs and institutions, including the Regional Economic Communities on democracy, governance and human rights.
This also explains why aspiration six (6) of the Agenda 2063 talks of an Africa whose development is people-driven, most importantly relying on the potentials offered by its women as well as youth. The role of women and youth in the promotion and protection of Human and People’s Rights in Africa is therefore instrumental in realizing a an Africa of good governance, justice, rule of law as well as a peaceful and secure Africa all of which are the aspirations of Agenda 2063.

**Excellencies, Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen**

The African Union Executive Council in its 25th Ordinary Session, held from 20 to 24 June, 2014, in Malabo, Equatorial Guinea decided to “declare 2016 as the African Year of Human Rights with Particular Focus on the Rights of Women” following the year 2015 which was declared the Year of Women’s Empowerment and Development Towards Agenda 2063. Agenda 2063 recognizes that “good governance, democracy, respect for human rights, justice and the rule of law” are critical enablers and drivers of integration, prosperity, and sustainable development.

It should be recalled that 2016 is a veritable watershed in the continental human rights trajectory: 2016 marks the 35th Anniversary of the adoption of the African Charter in 1981; the 30th Anniversary of the entry into force of the African Charter in 1986; the 29th Anniversary of the operationalization of the Commission in 1987 (in 2016 the Commission will be just one year shy of its 30th Anniversary). The Year 2016 also marks the 10th Anniversary of the operationalization of the African Court. It is also 13 years since the adoption of the Maputo Protocol ushered in a new thinking in addressing gender inequality and the rights of women in Africa.

The declaration of 2016 as "**African Year of Human Rights with Particular Focus on the Rights of Women**" provides an opportunity for the entire continent to take stock of the human rights situation on the continent in general, and the rights of women in particular. The celebration seeks to, among other things: enhance public awareness about human rights; assess the ratification and implementation of the human rights instruments, in particular, the Maputo Protocol, and the progress made in advancing
the rights of women since the adoption of the Protocol; encourage Member States to develop policies, plans of actions and programmes on the promotion and protection of human and peoples’ rights, and specific programmes with the intention of integrating women in all spheres of life, so as to boost the development of women in Africa; encourage Member States to recommit to the promotion and protection of human rights.

**Excellencies, Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen**

I am delighted to note that one of the principal mandates of the African Commission on Human and Peoples’ Rights is to examine the contribution made so far by the Maputo Protocol in promoting and protecting the rights of women in Africa. However, and notwithstanding this milestone, African women continue to experience challenges at all levels.

The transformation of the OAU into the AU in 2002, ushered in an era of institution-building which saw the establishment of several human and peoples’ rights mechanisms aimed at advancing the fundamental rights of our people including women’s rights. The Constitutive Act of the African Union in particular recognizes the centrality of human rights in the integration of the continent and in sustainable peace and development, while Article 4(L) of the Constitutive Act enshrines the gender equality principle. Initiatives such as the New Partnership for Africa’s Development (NEPAD) and its African Peer Review Mechanisms (APRM) demonstrate that a new era has dawned in Africa, in our pursuit of democratic governance promotion and protection of human rights including women’s rights.

Today, the African continent has moved from norms setting to institutional development in the field of human and peoples’ rights in general, and the rights of women in particular, with the adoption of several human rights instruments, declarations and plans of actions, as well as the establishment of human and peoples’ rights mechanisms.

**Excellencies, Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen**
As the African Commission on Human and Peoples’ Rights is preparing itself during this Session to take actions and to make recommendations to promote and protect human and peoples’ rights in Africa, I wish to seek the support of its members to explore the possibility of issuing a recommendation to support the Declaration by our Heads of State and Government of 2017 as the year of youth in Africa under the theme “Harnessing the Demographic Dividend through Investments in Youth”.

I am sure you will agree with me that there is a need for Africa to rely on the potential of its youth through the implementation of basic Human Rights such as quality education and the creation of jobs. Additionally it is important to address the issue of unemployment in which the youth are the hardest hit social group. Youth unemployment in Africa is estimated at a staggering rate of 60%. The youth in Africa constitute about 70% percent of Africa’s one billion population. Depending on how the potential of our youth is tapped towards achieving Agenda 2063, the African you will become either an asset for prosperity or a liability for instability.

In conclusion, I would like to, once again, express our appreciation to the People and the Government of the Islamic Republic of The Gambia and the African Commission on Human and Peoples’ Rights for taking the initiative to organize this important gathering.

I wish you successful and fruitful deliberations during this 59th Session of the African Commission on Human and Peoples’ Rights.

I thank you for your kind attention.