



**Remarks by**

**H.E. Mr. John W. Ashe**

**President of the 68<sup>th</sup> Session of the United Nations  
General Assembly**

**Opening Session of the High-Level Segment of the  
25<sup>th</sup> Session of the Human Rights Council**

**Geneva**

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*Please check against delivery*

Heads of Government,  
Ministers,  
Mr. President,  
Excellencies,  
Secretary-General,  
Madame High Commissioner,  
Distinguished guests,  
Ladies and Gentlemen,

I bring you warm greetings from the entire membership of the 68<sup>th</sup> session of the United Nations General Assembly.

It is indeed an honour for me to address the opening of the high-level segment of the twenty-fifth regular session of the Human Rights Council. The United Nations General Assembly and the Human Rights Council have a close and mutually supportive relationship, and last year I had the honor to address the General Assembly on the occasion of the 65<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the adoption of what I believe to be one of the most important documents in world history – the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR).

In these troubled times, let us take a moment to remember that a mere three years after the founding of the United Nations, our Assembly of nations stood together to reaffirm their faith in universal human rights as a main pillar of the organization, and that the Universal Declaration transformed into reality for many generations and many more that are still to come- the bold and audacious premise that all people – regardless of circumstance – are born free and equal in dignity and rights.

So with that as our shared backdrop, let me congratulate, His Excellency Ambassador Ella on assuming the Presidency of the Eighth Cycle of the Council, as well as the Permanent Representatives of India, Czech Republic, Argentina and Italy for their election to the Bureau. I also extend my thanks to H.E. Remigiusz Henzcel, Permanent

Representative of Poland and former President, and to the previous members of the Bureau for their able stewardship of the Council during the Seventh Cycle.

Excellencies,

Distinguished Guests,

Since it was established in March 2006, this Council has been the global standard bearer for strengthening the protection and promotion of human rights around the world. Despite budgetary constraints, the Council has continued to shine a spotlight on persistent and pressing human rights violations and abuses afflicting our world and its people. Through its adoption of increasing numbers of mandates and extensions, resolutions and decisions, as well as convening thematic debates and interactive dialogues, this Council can be proud of its many achievements. The work of this Council is an affirmation that basic rights and fundamental freedoms are inherent to all human beings- inalienable and equally applicable to everyone at all times, and I thank you for standing up for those who could not and cannot do so for themselves, and for reminding member States that UDHR must be applied in totality and not selectively.

Based on the draft Programme of Work, it appears that this session will be a stimulating one, commencing during this important period following the successful conclusion of the first cycle of the Universal Period Review, one of the core mandates of the Council that has enabled reviews of the human rights records of the entire UN membership during its first cycle. Member States should be encouraged by this accomplishment and continue cooperation with this critically important mechanism during this second cycle.

Progress on the human rights treaty body system indicates that there are important times ahead for the work of this Council and the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights. I am indeed pleased that the General Assembly was able to successfully conclude on 7 February the open-ended intergovernmental negotiations on strengthening and enhancing the effective functioning of the human rights treaty body system, under the stewardship of the Permanent Representatives of Iceland and Tunisia. I extend my

sincere thanks and appreciation to their Excellencies for their tireless work in facilitating the process.

The resulting resolution, which I have referred to the Fifth Committee for action, is a delicate, balanced representation of the various views and concerns expressed during the process and draws to a close two years of protracted discussions both in Geneva and New York. I take this opportunity to also make note of the contributions of the Permanent Representative of Indonesia, who was also a previous co-facilitator of the intergovernmental process.

We are confident that the effective functioning of the human rights treaty body system will facilitate member States' adherence to their respective reporting obligations to those international human rights treaties to which they are a State Party.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

As many of you are aware, my theme for the 68<sup>th</sup> session of the General Assembly is – **The Post-2015 Development Agenda: Setting the Stage**. To further elaborate this theme, I have committed to helping Member States “set the stage” for a post 2015 development agenda by convening three (3) high-level events and (3) thematic debates. The ‘inequality’ issue is a component of the theme of the upcoming High-level Event on the Contributions of Women, the Young and Civil Society to the Post-2015 Development Agenda, which will commence in three days in New York. There will also be a high-level event on Human Rights and the Rule of Law, which will take place in June. I encourage your delegations to participate at the highest level possible.

In 2015, UN Member States will adopt a universal and shared development agenda that is meant to serve as guide for global development for decades to come. As we consider the components of a new development agenda, we remain challenged to address rising inequality, including economic inequality; inequitable access to resources and services; erosion of social protection; increasing marginalization of people living in poverty,

conflict, violence and insecurity; and social injustice as a result of discrimination and barriers related to gender, age, disability, ethnicity and national origin, among other factors.

So we need to work hard to and with all the resources necessary to ensure that the poorest and most marginalized and most vulnerable amongst can have a better tomorrow and that all, and not just a few, can have “The Future we Want”. Let us remember that can be no true development unless all people have access to equal human rights, democracy, dignity, and freedom.

Excellencies,

Allow me to please draw your attention some other issues that impact your work. The deteriorating situation in the Syrian Arab Republic remains a great concern. I note that the updated report of the work of the Commission of Inquiry on the situation in the Syrian Arab Republic is scheduled to be presented to the Council this session.

Last week, the General Assembly convened an informal briefing for member States on the humanitarian situation in the Syrian Arab Republic, where we heard about the dire conditions of people suffering from this ongoing conflict. In this regard, I would like to thank High Commissioner Pillay; High Commissioner Guterres; Director-General Chan; and Ms. Kyung-wha Kang, Assistant Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Deputy Emergency Relief Coordinator for their informative briefings on the scope of this truly severe humanitarian situation.

I would also like to draw your attention to a number of upcoming initiatives on important human rights issues that will take place in the weeks and months ahead. On 21 March the General Assembly will join this Council in the annual commemoration of the International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination. GA Resolution 68/151 calls for the convening of a special debate on the state of racial discrimination worldwide, with the participation of the Secretary-General, the High Commissioner for Human

Rights, Member States and civil society organizations and certain eminent personalities active in the field of racial discrimination. As planning proceeds for this special meeting, it is our intent to make it a fitting tribute to the victims of the Sharpeville massacre and to others who struggle against racism and racial discrimination throughout the world.

It will also be a time to reflect on the significant contributions of the late Nelson Mandela, former President of the Republic of South Africa who was a shining light and symbol of the fight against racism and injustice. We honour his contributions as we strive to eliminate the scourge of racism, racial discrimination and intolerance worldwide.

In September during the sixty-ninth session, the General Assembly is also mandated to convene a World Conference on Indigenous Peoples. My office has consulted widely on the matter and is now in a position to invite members States to begin the intergovernmental process on the organization and additional modalities for the Conference.

There are also plans during the sixty-ninth session to commemorate the twenty-fifth anniversary of the adoption of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, a significant achievement in the field of human rights with almost universal ratification. I note that the Council will undertake its annual full-day meeting on the rights of the child, which I am sure will contribute to the commemorations.

Excellencies,

In addition to celebrating the 65<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Universal Declaration, we also celebrated the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the adoption of the Vienna Declaration and the establishment of the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights. At the same time, we awarded the Human Rights Prize to a number of individuals and an institution that have worked tirelessly to promote and protect the principles and ideals of the Declaration. This commemoration reminds us of how far we have come, how important this work is and how much potential it has to bring good in the world. Yet it also reminds

us of how much more needs to be done and how much courage and fortitude is required by those who champion human rights, when it is so easy to look the other way or take less courageous stand.

So as we take pride in the Council's achievements, let us remain mindful of the obstacles and constraints in addressing new and emerging challenges, increasing levels of civil unrest, and political and humanitarian crises; and let us take the necessary measures to respond. For we should never forget that we carry forth the ideals upon which this Council was founded when our actions honor and uphold its principles.

I wish you great success in your deliberations.

Thank you.

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