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UNITED KINGDOM OF GREAT BRITAIN AND NORTHERN IRELAND

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THE RULE OF LAW AT THE NATIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL LEVELS

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Delivered by Melina Lito

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Madame Chair,

I would like to start by thanking the Assistant Secretary General for introducing the Secretary General's report on strengthening and coordinating the United Nations' rule of law activities.

The Covid-19 pandemic has posed an unprecedented threat to rule of law. It has challenged all legal systems to find new ways to ensure access to justice and dispute resolution continues in unprecedented circumstances.

Sadly, in many countries Covid-19 has been used as a pretext for increasing pressure on those who defend the rule of law, including human rights defenders, journalists and legal practitioners.

The United Kingdom has continued to champion the rule of law in partnership with other States and civil society. Our own legal system has a proud history of the development and protection of rule of law, including the right of effective access to a court. In 1215 it was included in the Magna Carta, and then in 1297 the statute book¹ says that "*we will not deny or defer to any man either Justice or Right.*"

But we have, like all States, faced challenges, particularly due to the physical closure of courts and tribunals to reduce risks to public health. But, new technologies have helped to ensure access to justice through the pandemic,

¹ Magna Carta (1297), Chapter 9 XXIX. See: <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld5801/ldselect/ldconst/257/257.pdf>

and will surely play a major role in the future of legal systems around the world.

Madame Chair,

The pandemic has also brought disproportionately heavy consequences for women and girls. Violence against women and girls intensified around the world during 2020. The United Kingdom, like other countries, has seen increases in domestic violence and has responded with greater funding for safe accommodation and support for victims. The UK also started a global follow-up programme to the highly successful 'What Works to Prevent Violence' initiative, which will build the evidence base and scale up effective approaches.

COVID-19 has also exacerbated conflict-related sexual violence (CRSV). The United Kingdom has put justice at the heart of the Preventing Sexual Violence in Conflict Initiative. We continue to support access to survivor-centred justice for the victims of conflict-related sexual violence that is truly responsive to the needs and wishes of survivors, as well as ensuring that perpetrators are held accountable. For instance, the United Kingdom is funding the development of the Murad Code, which will help to ensure that minimum standards are upheld when documenting evidence of conflict-related sexual violence, protecting survivors' rights and bolstering prosecutions.

Madame Chair,

We cannot underestimate that technology is revolutionising how we access justice and resolve disputes. The UK's investment in LawTech – bringing together Tech pioneers and the legal sector to provide innovative solutions – has played a critical role this year. Remote hearing capabilities and access to services online have been vital to ensuring access to justice during the pandemic, while limiting the need for physical attendance at courts, tribunals and offices.

But, at the same time, around the world pandemic control measures and new technology have been used to undermine the rule of law, and persecute the lawyers and human rights defenders who uphold it. The past year saw a worrying decline in global freedom, including attacks on the independence of the judiciary and the abuse of emergency powers to harass and intimidate human rights defenders, lawyers and journalists. Measures that undermine judicial independence and the rule of law ultimately leave societies weaker and more divided, as disputes cannot be resolved fairly and openly.

The rule of law is essential to the enjoyment of universal human rights, as well as the prosperity and security of all States and societies, and is a necessary condition for Open Societies, with democratic institutions and protection for human rights, to emerge and flourish.

Madame Chair,

Rule of law is also critical to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals, particularly Goal 16 – the goal of promoting peaceful and inclusive societies

for sustainable development, providing access to justice for all and building effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels. The United Kingdom is proud to have been a champion for SDG16.

Finally, the United Kingdom welcomes and supports the Secretary-General's efforts in developing a new vision for the implementation of rule of law including a process which is inclusive, and takes account of the most marginalised in societies and those that represent them.

Thank you, Madame Chair.