Under the Patronage of His Excellency the Prime Minister Dr. Omar Al-Razzaz

On the occasion of the 70th Anniversary of the UDHR

Final Ceremony

Speech by Ambassador of South Africa

His Excellency Mr. John Davis

December 10, 2018
Your Excellency the Prime Minister of Jordan, Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen

It is a privilege and an honour for me to be with you today to celebrate with people all around the world the 70th anniversary of the adoption of the Universal declaration of Human Rights.

It is a sobering thought that just 6 months before the adoption of the UDHR in December 1948, the minority electorate in South Africa chose the pro-Apartheid National Party as the new government. Ironically, the National Party received only 40% of the votes cast. Needless to say, South Africa abstained from voting when the UDHR was adopted, despite having been prominent in the drafting of the UN Charter just three years earlier.

Today, seventy years later, we in the new South Africa can look back with satisfaction at how far we have come since then, and how much we owe to the international community for their unwavering support for the people of South Africa. The UDHR was a source of inspiration to South Africans throughout the apartheid years. A gathering of many South African political groups adopted the Freedom Charter in 1955, which has a number of elements in common with the UDHR, but it was only after the first democratic elections in South Africa in 1994 that we were able to begin work on our new constitution, which incorporates a Bill of Rights as Chapter 2 of that constitution. One consolation after all those years of suffering was that we were able to draft an exceptionally modern and comprehensive constitution, incorporating all the main elements of the UDHR. We are proud of this constitution and it is generally admired by the international community.

I must point out though that a constitution by itself is just a document. It is the institutions that support that constitution as well as the general support of the citizens of the country that breathe life into the constitution and the rights it enshrines. The courts are absolutely vital in protecting those rights, but the support of the people is also vital.

We have a tradition in South African society of Ubuntu, which is an indigenous Nguni word loosely meaning “humanity”. Sometimes it is translated as “I am because we are”. The concept of Ubuntu, which goes back many centuries, resonates through our constitution and lends strong public support to the rights in the constitution. Our free press also lends strong supports to the values we aspire to support. Support for gender equality, racial equality and religious freedom is particularly strong in South Africa.

Are we a perfect society because of our wonderful constitution? Certainly not! We have a long way to go before we can say we have succeeded in ensuring that everyone’s rights are protected. Our media is full of stories of how often people’s rights are trampled on. Violence against women is an enduring problem and certain communities, such as the LGBT community, are particularly vulnerable, but we are well into our journey towards a better society in a better world.

We believe that we all have a duty to encourage support for human rights across the world, and to make positive gestures of support for people who are suffering from human rights abuses, wherever they may be. It is often difficult to express that support when the consequences can be even worse oppression, but we should constantly be trying and constantly working with like-minded countries and societies to make progress.

At this stage let me congratulate the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan on the progress they have made in promoting human rights. The Amman Centre for Human Rights Studies deserves our full support for the work they are doing and I would like to end by thanking them for inviting me to speak today and wish them every success in the future.