



OPENING STATEMENT BY

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ATTORNEY-GENERAL AND MINISTER OF LEGAL AFFAIRS

ON THE OCCASION OF THE

FOURTH CYCLE OF THE UNIVERSAL PERIODIC REVIEW

OF

THE COMMONWEALTH OF THE BAHAMAS

AT THE

43RD SESSION OF THE UNIVERSAL PERIODIC REVIEW WORKING GROUP

UNITED NATIONS HUMAN RIGHTS COUNCIL

3RD MAY 2023

GENEVA, SWITZERLAND

Introduction

Excellencies, Distinguished Delegates, representatives of civil society, ladies and gentlemen — good afternoon.

It is indeed an honour and a pleasure for me to represent the Commonwealth of The Bahamas at this Fourth Cycle of the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) and 43rd Session of the UPR Working Group.

Background

Mr. President, the contemporary history of The Bahamas begins with a quest for religious freedoms. Throughout the centuries, the people who settled these islands have adopted a respect for human rights and the rule of law, which continues to thrive.

Today, at the national level, our participation in this process is symbolic of the significance which The Bahamas attributes to the promotion and protection of fundamental freedoms and human rights and of its commitment to the principles of the United Nations. On behalf of myself, members of my delegation and my country, I wish to reaffirm The Bahamas' commitment and support for the work of the Human Rights Council (HRC) and its Universal Periodic Review (UPR) mechanism.

Before I commence my opening remarks, it is appropriate to begin by thanking the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights and all contributing Members of the Voluntary Fund for Participation, for facilitating The Bahamas' involvement in this Review.

Celebrating 50 Years

Mr. President, The Bahamas on the 10th July 2023 will celebrate 50 years of Independence, and 50 years as a member of the United Nations.

We thought it fitting to commence this statement with a portion of the speech presented at the United Nations in 1973 by the Father of our Nation, Sir Oscar Lynden Pindling. I quote.....

“During all of the intervening years of continuous constitutionally elected authority, The Bahamas has undergone constant evolution in an entirely peaceful atmosphere, without violence; and we are proud to have achieved revolutionary political changes by this method. As a new nation, The Bahamas in relationship with the rest of the world will adhere to its commitment to ordered, reasoned, unemotional and evolutionary progress, dominated by the deeply held religious beliefs of its people and their commitment to the Rule of Law.”

Our participation here today represents a continuity of our adherence to that commitment and a contribution to the ongoing fulfilment of our initial promise as a member of this community of nations.

Approach

Mr. President, as I begin the substance of my contribution, I will update the Council on various thematic areas in the field of human rights which also respond to some of the advanced questions posed by States.

Challenges – Hurricane Dorian and the Pandemic

Mr. President, in September 2019, Hurricane Dorian, the strongest Atlantic storm documented to directly impact landmass, devastated the islands of Abaco and Grand Bahama, resulting in loss of life, livelihood and internal displacement. The damages totaled an estimated \$3.4 billion (USD), which is equal to one-quarter of The Bahamas' GDP.

Just six months after the passage of Hurricane Dorian, the COVID-19 pandemic struck, also resulting in loss of life and livelihood, for which the total estimated cost of impacts and effects on The Bahamas stands at \$9.5 billion.

The twin disasters of Hurricane Dorian and the COVID-19 pandemic have been estimated to cost The Bahamas a combined \$13.1 billion and in a very short period of time, brought about measureless loss of opportunity, income and growth; rolling back previous developmental gains that were made over decades.

Constitutional and legislative framework

Mr. President, there are two jurisprudential factors that form an important part of the legal and institutional framework of the human rights environment in The Bahamas.

Firstly, The Bahamas is a Constitutional Parliamentary Democracy, whose Constitution entrenches many of its legal provisions, especially those related to fundamental rights and freedoms. Constitutional change requires special procedures, parliamentary majorities and referenda for their amendment thus posing an inherent challenge to reform.

Secondly, the dualist nature of our legal system requires implementation legislation to bring international conventions into domestic law. In a small state with limited resources, this can pose obstacles to the effective and efficient domestication of international legal obligations. Nevertheless, the Government is committed to this process and is determined to improve the domestication of such instruments.

Thematic Areas of Concern

1. Recommendations not accepted

Mr. President, I now turn to the recommendations received over the course of the UPR cycles, which The Bahamas noted during the last review period. They are as follows:

Death penalty

We wish to highlight the fact that there has been no executions carried out in The Bahamas for more than two decades. The Government of The Bahamas is nevertheless aware of the longstanding recommendation for the establishment of a *de jure* moratorium on executions and/or the abolition of the death penalty in The Bahamas. The Bahamas is however not considering any immediate action to establish a formal moratorium on the death penalty or to ratify the Second Optional Protocol to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights which aims at the abolition of the death penalty. It is also of note that the Privy Council, our highest court, severely constrains the circumstances where the death penalty can be utilized to the “worst of the worst”.

While The Bahamas has not ratified the First Optional Protocol to the International Convention on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) nor the Third Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), The Bahamas continues to take a systematic approach to the protection of the rights of children. I will address this issue in further detail later in this statement.

Regarding the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), the matter continues to be looked at closely, including requirements to create the conditions that are necessary to remove our reservation to Article 29

Corporal Punishment

Mr. President, As a signatory to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, the Ministry of Education introduced its Safe Schools Protocol to regulate student discipline matters in government maintained schools. Inappropriate student behaviors are divided into four categories. Level I and II infractions are addressed by the classroom teacher while Level III and IV infractions are advanced to a school administrator. At no level is corporal punishment recommended and the policy expectation is that should not have to be used.

Since the last reporting cycle in 2018, there have been three (3) reported cases of corporal punishment in schools. In those cases, the Ministers of Education called for the country to denounce the cultural practice of corporal punishment. In the most recent incident, the school administrator was placed on administrative leave.

As mentioned in previous reports, since the enactment of the Bahamas Correctional Services Act in 2014, corporal punishment as a disciplinary measure for prisoners was repealed. Additionally, the Early Childhood Care (National Standards) Regulations, 2015, were enacted and prohibit the use of corporal punishment in day care centres and pre-schools.

The Department of Social Services has also implemented a National Parenting Program that trains parents in alternative forms of discipline.

Sexual Orientation

The Bahamas is committed to all efforts to combat all forms of discrimination against persons. While serving as a Member of the Human Rights Council, The Bahamas supported the resolution

(41/18) that renewed the mandate of the Independent Expert on Protection against Violence and Discrimination based on Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity in 2019. The Bahamas later reaffirmed its support of the mandate through its vote in the affirmative of the General Assembly resolution (74/394) containing the subsequent Report of the Human Rights Council.

2. Acceptance of international norms

Mr. President, The Bahamas is pleased to inform that since its last Review, the Government ratified the United Nations Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment in May 2018.

The Government continues to review those human rights instruments to which it is not a State Party, such as the Convention for Migrant Workers and their families.

National Human Rights Institution (NHRI)

Regarding the recommendations for the creation of a national human rights institution, The Bahamas is pleased to announce that after a comprehensive review of best practices we tabled the Ombudsman Bill, 2023 which includes the Paris Principles, decisively taking a hybrid approach for the implementation of the NHRI. At our third Cycle we stated that we tabled the Ombudsman Bill 2017, however the government withdrew the Bill, to ensure compliance with the Paris Principles.

The Office of the Ombudsman will create a direct source of relief where people have legitimate grievances due to the actions or inactions of the Government or any agency of the Government.

Parliamentary Committee on Human Rights (PCHR)

In seeking to promote uniformity in the implementation, protection and enforcement of human rights we recognize the critical role of Parliament in our country's compliance with human rights obligations. The Government recently passed a Resolution in the House Assembly for the establishment of the Parliamentary Committee on Human Rights (PCHR), which is the first of its kind in The Bahamas and the third such entity in our Caribbean Community (CARICOM).

The PCHR will assess and evaluate all matters relating to the protection and enforcement of human rights in The Bahamas; determine the level at which such rights comply with regional and international obligations; make recommendations to guide the legislative processes through a human rights lens; and hold public hearings on human rights related issues.

In conjunction with the National Reporting Cooperation Mechanism (NRCM), the PCHR further demonstrates the Government's commitment to the promotion and protection of all human rights in all areas of our governance.

I now turn to some of the thematic considerations that have arisen from this UPR process and associated reviews.

3. Administration of Justice and Fair Trial

Swift Justice

Mr. President, The Bahamas has previously reported that the "Swift Justice" Initiative was established to proactively assist the judicial system as well as strengthen transparency. Swift Justice meetings are held weekly for various stakeholders to meet and discuss pending criminal matters and to provide prosecutors with the necessary documents required in the preparation of trial prosecutions.

Tackling the backlog

In 2023, a Backlog reduction committee and a criminal case management reform committee was established to make meaningful recommendations for the improvement of the criminal justice system and tackle the backlog of cases. This includes the implementation of a digital case management system for the judiciary.

Public Defenders

Established in 2017, the role of the Office of Public Defender (OPD) is to provide legal services to persons accused of a criminal offense where there is a constitutional right to a lawyer and the accused is unable to afford an attorney. The OPD provides representation, particularly in circumstances involving juvenile offenders. Through its work, the OPD engages in public awareness and education on the role of the office and why Criminal Justice reform is relevant and necessary.

Since its official opening in February 2017, the OPD received 353 criminal files shared between the Court of Appeal and the Supreme Court.

Family Court

In July 2022, a Family Law Committee was established to support the establishment of the Family Court to adjudicate family related matters. The Committee is made up of judicial stakeholders in the Magistrate and Supreme Courts. The architect of the Family Court of Trinidad & Tobago has been engaged to advise the Committee on the legislative framework and physical needs of a Family Court for The Bahamas.

The Government of The Bahamas has leased a building for the establishment of the Family Court. Architects and planners have been engaged to outfit the facility for use as a Family Court. A contractor has been engaged to carry out the preliminary work. The Family Courts should be completed this year.

4. Children and Education

The Government continues to take a systematic approach to ensure that children's rights are protected throughout The Bahamas.

Mandatory Action Rescuing Children Operation (MARCO) Alert System

The Mandatory Action Rescuing Children Operation (MARCO) Alert System is in effect as of 2022. The system is immediately activated once a child is reported missing by their family and details are given to the police. The Public Warning Alert enables the police to send out a broadcast through commercial radio stations, television broadcasts, teletext communications, electronic network systems, and billboards when the Commissioner of Police determines that a child is missing.

The National Child Protection Council and National Committee for Families and Children

The Government appointed members of the National Child Protection Council and the National Committee for Families and Children early 2023. The Government continues to provide an annual grant to the Council to support their public campaign for children.

Right to education

Mr. President, The Government of the Bahamas, through the Ministry of Education and Technical and Vocational Training remains steadfast to provide all persons in The Bahamas an opportunity to receive an education that will equip them with the necessary knowledge, skills, beliefs and attitudes required for work and life in a democratic society.

In 2016 the Bahamas requested and secured technical assistance from UNESCO in bringing the international standards of the delivery of quality education to children and adults. In 2018, the UNESCO team produced the *“Report on the Right to Education in the Bahamas and recommendations for the revision of the Education Act”*. These recommendations as well as the SDG targets have been considered in the development of the draft amendment to the Education Act. The draft is under review by the Minister of Education and will then be brought before the Cabinet for review.

Impact of COVID-19 and Hurricane Dorian on Education

Mr. President, The COVID-19 Pandemic necessitated the implementation of strategies to ensure continued learning for students. The Bahamas Virtual Schools, which was launched immediately after Hurricane Dorian, was expanded with the implementation of a Learning Management online platform for all students in government-maintained schools. School buildings were closed but learning continued. This programme was further expanded for students with chronic or debilitating illnesses.

Education and Persons with Disabilities

Mr. President, The Government is making greater investments in human resources to accommodate persons with disabilities in our education system. This is demonstrated by utilizing smaller group learning environments as well as inclusion in collective activities such as sports and special events.

Inter-Agency Taskforce for Education

Recognizing that more than four thousand students did not return to school once convened for in-person learning after the pandemic, the Minister of Education convened an inter-agency task force mandated to find the students and get them back to learning. Strategies are in place to address chronic absenteeism as well as to assess the learning loss of students across the Bahamas. The programme has been very successful in addressing the learning gap caused by the pandemic.

Education and Mental Health

Mr. President, The Government of the Bahamas has assigned to all public schools, Guidance Counsellors who work with our public-school psychologists, and Social Services School Welfare officers, bringing focus to mental and emotional health of students.

5. Women

Mr. President, the advancement and equality of women in society and politics is of great importance. In the recent 2021 general election, for the first time in the history of The Bahamas, about sixty (60) women offered themselves to run for Parliament. Seven (7) were successful, which is the largest number of women ever to sit in Parliament.

Gender-based violence

the Department of Social Services, through its Domestic Violence and Counselling Unit provides support services to survivors of domestic violence, and offers group counseling for couples, family,

individuals and groups of people who are experiencing social, personal and interpersonal challenges.

The National Task Force for Gender-Based Violence continues to be active, particularly in the implementation of the Gender-Based Violence Family Island Councils, having been recently implemented in Grand Bahama and Abaco islands. Their focus will be on community-based partnership to prevent Gender-Based Violence (GBV) in the island communities to ensure that survivors of GBV receive support and service needed for recovery.

The Department of Gender and Family Affairs (DGFA) works with law enforcement and has conducted GBV prevention exercises with over 900 law enforcement officers and just over 500 residents from the island communities.

Mr. President, the Government continues its efforts in the implementation of the Gender-based Violence (GBV) Strategic Plan, with training on GBV within the Primary, Junior and Secondary Schools. Training has also been conducted with various civic groups. A Safe House has been put in place for victims to report their matters in a safe place and to be housed along with their children.

It is anticipated that legislation to address domestic violence and GBV will be released for public consultation this month with a view to debate and passage in Parliament this calendar year.

Domestic Violence Task Force (RBPF)

The Domestic Violence Task Force Unit of our Police Force was established in July 2022 to assist in eradicating Domestic Violence throughout the country working in collaboration with the relevant stakeholders. Unit Officers have commenced sensitization training

to nine (9) Police Station Divisions, the Royal Bahamas Defense Force and the Bahamas Department of Corrections Services.

Rape within a Marriage

We are aware of the concerns with respect to the criminalization of marital rape. Successive Governments have considered an approach for an amendment to the Sexual Offence Act. The current Government has prepared an amendment that would remove the exemption of a spouse from the definition of rape, expand on the definition of consent, add an offense of indecent assault and refine the offence of aggravated sexual assault.

The proposed amendment to the Sexual Offences Act has been released for wide public consultation and presentations to the religious community and civil society have been made. The Ministry of Social Services continues its consultation efforts on the amendment.

6. Eradication of Poverty

Mr. President, The Government is intentional in ensuring that its programmes and policies continue with a goal to eradicate poverty in The Bahamas. We have programmes targeted for the poor and vulnerable sectors, which include Food Assistance, Rent Assistance, Financial Assistance (Uniform Assistance, Water, Electricity, Cooking Gas, Clothing, Furniture etc.) Burial Assistance, Fire Relief, Temporary Shelter and Disability Allowance.

In March 2021, a MIS system was developed and implemented to further enhance the delivery of service digitally.

7. Persons with disabilities

Mr. President, the Government of The Bahamas is especially cognizant of the needs of Persons with Disabilities. In collaboration with civil society, the Government has been active in its efforts to provide support and promote a higher quality of life for persons with disabilities.

Experiences in Hurricane Dorian and the Pandemic have emphasized the need for an on-going effort to identify the location of vulnerable persons, and relocate them in advance of an emergency, such as a hurricane. Climate change is a significant threat to this vulnerable community with every effort being made to protect them.

Our commitment is demonstrated by the ratification of ILO convention 159 to establish the right for Persons with Disabilities to access Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment Opportunities.

The National Commission's AccessAbility Bahamas APP, since its launch in December 2022, has over 100 current users and increasing. It is significant that the APP converts text to speech for those with visual impairments and provides closed captioning for the hearing-impaired to have access to the latest information and to receive NEMA alerts.

Mr. President, Mental health has become a major focus of public health efforts. In 2022, The Government passed the Mental Health Bill in compliance with the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, and it provides a modern, best practice framework, one which will usher us into a new era for mental health. The new legislation provides for the promotion, protection, and enforcement of the rights of persons diagnosed or exhibiting symptoms of mental illness as well as the establishment of a mental health services board and a mental health review tribunal.

8. Detention

Mr. President, The Bahamas continues its efforts to improve prisoners' detention conditions, health care and nutrition. The food service and medical care continue to improve. In 2022, the Government began a search for mental health professionals to work full-time at the BDOCS. It is expected that two psychiatrists and two psychologists will be on staff. Officers are also expected to be trained to recognize mental incapacities. Inmates continue to have access to medical care upon entry and request. The medical services continue to be strengthened to meet special needs of inmates.

BDOCS has included the Mandela Rules in its Core Values as well as in its curriculum for Trainee Correctional Officers. The renovation of the maximum-security Housing Unit is ongoing. The Government expects to soon break ground for a new high security facility. The renovation of three medium-security dormitories and the Female Housing Unit is ongoing. A library has also been newly dedicated. The Remand Centre is now identified as the Juvenile Unit and a new Juvenile Dormitory is currently under construction. This facility will be completely detached from all adult facilities.

9. Nationality

Mr. President, The constitution of The Bahamas provides for certain discriminatory matters on the transmission of citizenship. Twice The Bahamas has sought a public referendum to amend the Constitution to provide equality in the transmission of citizenship, twice it has failed. The Constitution of The Bahamas provides for the ability to provide further grounds for acquisition of citizenship through legislation.

There is a pending matter before the Privy Council, our highest court, on the interpretation of Section 6 of the Constitution, and specifically the citizenship of children born outside of wedlock

where the father is Bahamian, and the mother is not Bahamian. The Government of The Bahamas has taken a policy decision on waiting for the privy council decision before advancing consideration of legislation to eliminate all forms of discrimination in transmission of citizenship. We anticipate the decision to be published May 5, which will provide clarity on one area where the Constitution is interpreted to discriminate. This decision should enable the Government to initiate legislative reforms to eliminate all inequalities in the transferal of citizenship.

10. Migration

Mr. President, I now turn to issues relative to migration.

The Bahamas continues to be the recipient of large numbers of irregular migrants either seeking employment in The Bahamas or using the country as a transit point to the United States of America. The Bahamas has long informed the international community of the administrative and other myriad challenges posed by the continued influx of irregular migrants, the majority of whom are from Haiti and Cuba. Moreover, to effect the smooth return of irregular migrants not qualifying for refugee status, the Bahamas has signed Memoranda of Understanding that govern the return of nationals from Cuba and Haiti, respectively.

Carmichael Road Detention Centre

Mr. President, we are pleased to announce that on Monday 13 March 2023 during the last UPR Cycle, a new medical Clinic commenced operation at the Detention Center and a physician is on-site three times per week.

In keeping with international standards, the policy that women detainees with children be in separate accommodations, still stands. The Bahamas Red Cross remains a vital partner of the

Government in assisting with donations of clothing, blankets, toiletries, and miscellaneous items as necessary for the women and children. The DOI continues to work closely with the local office of UNHCR on these and similar migration matters.

11. Rights of Migrants

Mr. Present, Migration has been a significant factor in contributing to a population increase by 13.6 per cent from 2010 to 2022.

Notwithstanding its policy of detention and repatriation, which applies to all irregular migrants irrespective of race, colour or place of origin, all persons living in The Bahamas have free access to education, health care and social services without regard to their immigration status.

Refugees and detainees

Mr. President, the 2022 reporting period showed uncharacteristically high numbers in the processing of irregular migrants and those requesting asylum. In keeping with protocols developed in consultation with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), 705 persons were screened, 9 persons were interviewed and 2 were processed for refugee status in 2022.

The Government continues to take every effort to improve the efficiency of detention, interview and repatriation, being guided by the 1951 Convention and its 1967 Protocol. The Refugee Administration Unit (RAU) has reaffirmed that all applications are considered by merit and each matter adjudicated on a case-by-case basis. The RAU has made alternative recommendations to asylum where protection may be warranted but the individual does not meet the requisite criteria.

Migration Working Group (MWG)

Mr. President, the Migration Working Group, which brings together various stakeholders including the Immigration Department's Refugee Unit and Civil Society, continues to meet focusing on the effective implementation of migration-related obligations. In 2019, the MWG developed quarterly meetings with the local UNHCR representative. The Bahamas also continues to engage with the Caribbean Migration Consultation (CMC) mechanism and subregional efforts.

In July 2022, the Detention Centre Working Group was formed, meeting once a week with a mandate establishing human rights protocols to protect the dignity of all persons at the DC. The Group includes the Detention Centre and Refugee Unit of the Department of Immigration; Ministry of Foreign Affairs; International Cooperation Unit of the Office of The Attorney-General and chaired by the Civil Litigation section of the Office of The Attorney-General. The Migration Working Group continues to monitor the implementation of the obligation under the UNHCR's 10 Point Plan of Action and the Brazil Plan of Action.

Statelessness

Mr. President, on the issue of Statelessness, the Migration Working Group and the National Cooperation Reporting Mechanism partnered with UNHCR in July 2019 to provide training and awareness on the issue of Statelessness. The focus of the training was to bring awareness to UN Conventions that speak to the Status and the Reduction of Statelessness and to discuss the issue of "statelessness" within The Bahamas.

The Issue of Haiti

Mr. President, the crisis in Haiti continues to pose a substantial challenge not only to Haitians, but also to the region, including The Bahamas and neighboring countries, all of whom are experiencing a significant increase in irregular and often dangerous migration.

We believe that the solution to the unfolding socio-economic and political situation in Haiti lies in a Haitian-led initiative that should include the support of Caribbean Community (CARICOM) leaders. With the support and leadership of Haiti, collectively, we can, through regional organizations, help Haitians build a path out of crisis. This is a plea to you, the United Nations, for intervention in helping frame a path out of crisis.

Regional Cooperation

Mr. President, The Bahamas continues to engage with the regional and international community, contributing to the development of human rights and their standards through its participation in the United Nations (UN), the Organization of American States (OAS) and the Caribbean Community (CARICOM). Most recently, the country concluded its membership on the HRC, in which it served as an active Member for the term 2019 – 2021, participating in sessions of the Council and the UPR Working Groups.

12. Trafficking In Persons

The location of The Bahamas provides a geographic opportunity for trafficking in persons. In addition to internal efforts, the Government is engaged in the processes relating to the United Nations Convention Against Transnational Organized Crime (UNTOC), particularly its Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children. The Bahamas has partnered with INTERPOL and countries in the

region to target Human Smuggling and Trafficking criminal networks.

Mr. President, Assistance to victims includes food, utility, transportation, travel and translation services. Other services may include medical care, dental care and psychological counselling. Specifically, adults also receive assistance with job readiness skills and children receive free school uniforms and school supplies. In addition to these services, all victims are issued a monthly stipend for their upkeep.

In 2019, the TIP Hotline was launched. The Government approved a five-year Strategic TIP Action Plan for the period 2019-2023.

Establishment of TIP Secretariat

Mr. President, The TIP Secretariat was established in 2019 and is the national body to coordinate TIP activities which coordinates efforts of the Inter Ministry Committee and TIP Task Force.

13. Position of Human Rights Defenders

The Bahamas' Constitution guarantees freedom of expression and opinions, and human rights defenders in The Bahamas are accorded full respect and allowed to actively defend such rights without any restrictions or hindrance by Government.

Emerging Issues

Youth

Mr. President, the youth in the Bahamas are referred to as the greatest asset in society. The Bahamas Government continues to offer programmes to empower and develop youth. As one of the most important initiatives on their roster of goals for this

administrative term, the Government has recently launched the National Youth Guard. The NYG is focused on equipping young people with the tools needed to assist the nation during national emergencies and disasters. I am pleased that a youth representative is part of our delegation here today.

Our young people are increasing their impact in all sectors of society, providing significant input in the country's decision-making process. With respect to human rights, the Government has appointed youth representatives to high-level committees such as the National Reporting Cooperation Mechanism (NRCM), which serves as our National Mechanism for Implementation, Reporting and Follow-up (NMIRF), the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and the Migration Working Group. The Government has committed to updating the National Youth Policy and its accompanying legislation with intention for Parliament to adopt the Policy during October, this year's National Youth Month. The Policy will be fortified by a Strategic Action Plan and Implementation Strategy.

Older Persons

Mr. President, in addition to the youth, The Bahamas realizes the importance in providing support and guidance to older persons ensuring the same rights as everyone else as guaranteed by our Constitution.

Older people with or without disabilities have the same access to social benefits and assistance. Within the Ministry of Social Services and Urban Development, there is a department dedicated to the welfare of the elderly. Pensions, either contributory or non-contributory, are available to all persons at the age of 65, with voluntary retirement at age 60 at which time a reduced pension is provided.

The social assistance programs are available to the elderly, such as food vouchers, assistive/adaptive devices (wheelchairs, walkers, canes, hearing aids), funeral benefits, medical assistance (dental and medical). The Prescription Drug Plan provides free (covered) medications and there are Government Clinics and the Geriatric hospital for their care. The National Health Insurance scheme provides primary healthcare for everyone regardless of age at no cost.

Climate Change

Mr. President, The Government of The Bahamas has been a staunch advocate in the fight against climate change. The effect of the climate crisis is a human rights matter, and we call for its continued recognition as such by the Human Rights Council. The Bahamas was pleased to be part of the core group of countries that led the creation of the mandate of the Special Rapporteur on human rights and climate change. International efforts must be focused on the mitigation of and adaptation to climate change, especially for Small Island Developing States (SIDS).

As a SIDS, The Bahamas lives the reality of climate change and its negative impact on the promotion and protection of human rights, the effects of which are experienced by the most vulnerable in society. This might be the most significant impact on human rights in our country, in our hemisphere and in the world.

We will continue to use our voice to illustrate the impact of Climate Change as it relates to the promotion and protection of human rights.

National Development Plan (NDP)

Mr. President, in our prior administration, we spent years consulting with Bahamians from every walk of life to create the

National Development Plan (NDP), a foundational and comprehensive long-term plan for the country's development and prosperity. We specifically promised, in this administration, that we will complete, relaunch, legislate and implement the NDP. By the end of this year, we look to have an updated NDP, its plan for implementation and supporting legislation tabled for debate in Parliament.

In this regard, the Government has re-appointed the NDP Committee, appointing Co-Chairs to complete and prepare an implementation plan. We have an initial draft of legislation that will create the framework mechanism for implementation. We have included civil society, the business community, labour and religious leadership in the composition of the committee. With our commitment to complete and implement the NDP, we reaffirm our commitment to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

Conclusion

Mr. President, in conclusion, I wish to close as I began, with a quote from the Father of the Nation in 1973.....

“The Commonwealth of The Bahamas enters the United Nations in the closing decades of the 20th Century. We came late, but having arrived, we pledge to abide by the obligations imposed upon us as a Member of the United Nations organization; and we shall not shrink from our responsibilities as an active member of this institution. We have no delusions of grandeur about the influence an Independent Bahamas may have on world events, but we believe that this organization and its collective influence can hold, promote and guarantee peace...”

Mr. President, I wish to reassure you and the Members of the Council of the Government's commitment to continue the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental

freedoms and to the work of the Council and the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, that was made fifty years ago. Participating in this unique process is an opportunity and privilege which we do not take lightly. The Bahamas looks forward to its interaction with the Council today and to the work ahead in fulfillment of our international obligations. We are open to hearing your comments and recommendations.
