Plenary of the 69th Session of the United Nations General Assembly
Agenda Item 63: Report of the Human Rights Council

Statement by:
H.E. Mr. Ahmed Sareer, Permanent Representative of the Republic of the Maldives to the United Nations

New York, 17 November 2014

Thank you, Mr. President.

At the outset, my delegation wishes to thank His Excellency Mr. Baudelaire Ndong Ella, Permanent Representative of Gabon to the United Nations Office at Geneva, for his excellent work as the President of the Human Rights Council and for presenting its Report to the General Assembly. Allow me also to congratulate the new High Commissioner for Human Rights, His Excellency Mr. Zeid Ra’ad Al Hussein on his assumption of office, and reiterate the Maldives’ commitment to work with his Office to strengthen the promotion and protection of human rights across the globe. The Maldives would also like to once again express our appreciation to the former High Commissioner Ms. Navi Pillay for the important milestones achieved in human rights during her tenure, as well as the close relations she kept with the Government of Maldives.

Mr. President,

This year has seen an exponential increase in the work of the Human Rights Council, as seen by the number of panels, as well as the resolutions passed at the sessions. The special sessions dedicated to human rights situations in the Central African Republic, Occupied Palestinian Territories, as well as Iraq, have been a clear indication of the growing importance of the Council and its mechanisms.

We are grateful to all members of the Council for their commitment in steering through the human rights challenges of the year. As a member of the Council, the Maldives is proud of what the Council has achieved together in a year marred by violence, acts of aggression, natural disasters and intensifying climate change. While this is not an uplifting picture of the state of the world today, we are given hope by the reports of progress from the Human Rights Council before this General Assembly.

Mr. President,

Human rights can be regarded as the most important single issue for international cohesion and cooperation today. Human rights are a matter of the highest priority when responding to conflict situations, such as the escalating violence in the Palestinian occupied territories. However, human rights also cut across all other items on the global agenda. There is need for integrating a human rights-based approach to development as this Assembly begins its work towards the post-2015 development agenda. There is need for addressing the human rights dimension of climate change when concluding an international climate agreement in Paris 2015. Low-lying nations like the Maldives and many Small Island Developing States (SIDS) face the daily reality of climate change impacts and understand first-hand the fundamental nature of addressing it.
The Maldives is currently undergoing rapid transformation; we are a young democracy and a recent graduate from the category of least developed countries (LDCs), growing steadily in terms of both social and economic progress. Yet, as a Small Island Developing State, our path to development faces grave uncertainties as a result of worsening climate change scenarios. The core principles of human rights, human dignity and rule of law guide us through this time. These principles are embedded in the new Constitution of 2008. The constitutional protections of human rights have ensured that this new stage of development serves all people and leaves no one behind. The Government has given life to these principles with hard law and policy. The poor and vulnerable have the right to social security and income support under the Social Protection Act; the elderly are entitled to pensions; the disabled receive Government support pursuant to the Disabilities Act; and all Maldivians enjoy universal healthcare. Most notably, the Maldives has made great strides in advancing the rights of women, as seen by the recent enactment of the Sexual Offences and Sexual Harassment Act, to address violence and discrimination against women.

As seen in the past few years, although a small country, the Maldives has raised its voice in promoting human rights at the international level. The Maldives is currently serving a second term on the Human Rights Council. The Maldives has remained committed in its participation and contribution to the Human Rights Council, while highlighting the need to give voice to smaller states in larger fora. In particular, the Maldives has brought the human rights agenda of Small Island Developing States to the fore at the Human Rights Council, as well as at the General Assembly.

Mr. President,

The concept of universal human rights, as the founding principle of the United Nations Charter, should not be in conflict with national sovereignty. States must be open to willingly engaging in international human rights mechanisms such as the Universal Periodic Review process, including those in difficult human rights situations. We value the technical and other advisory assistance provided by the United Nations to assist States to implement the recommendations. We are encouraged by the ongoing efforts of the Human Rights Council, Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights and special mandate-holders to provide this assistance, and we urge donors to ensure these vital institutions have the resources needed to fulfil their mandates. Despite the limited resources available to the OHCHR with depleted funding, the Office has continued its engagement with member states to ensure that situations of human rights are addressed. The Maldives has always advocated for the importance of technical assistance to improve human rights. This is especially useful for LDCs and SIDS which face major challenges in terms of resources and expertise in addressing these issues.

While the legal framework of human rights protections becomes more complete and robust, implementation and enforcement of human rights on the ground remains a critical issue. The Maldives recognises that success in realising human rights cannot be achieved by laws and instruments alone. We must foster a culture of civic responsibility and respect for human rights, to complement the formal and statutory measures already in place. To be meaningful, the value of human rights must be embedded into institutions and inherent in the way we treat one another. The experience of the Maldives suggests that the enjoyment of human rights and freedoms can only be attained through cultivating values and building resilience in society. We must therefore combine human rights policy-making with programs and trainings to mainstream a human rights-based approach in our institutions, and education to instil a sense of responsibility and respect for human rights in society. Our aim should not be to meet the bare minimum standards of human rights prescribed by law or dictated by politics, but to strive boldly towards the higher, moral responsibility to fulfil human rights for all. We urge all nations to join us in this pursuit: aim high and go beyond.

Thank you.