STATEMENT

BY

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IN

THE THIRD COMMITTEE
68TH SESSION OF THE UNITED NATIONS GENERAL ASSEMBLY

ON

AGENDA ITEM 65:
PROMOTION AND PROTECTION OF THE RIGHTS OF CHILDREN

17TH OCTOBER 2013
Mr. Chairman,

Jamaica aligns itself with the statements delivered by Cuba on behalf of the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States, and by Barbados on behalf of the Caribbean Community.

I am pleased to participate in this deliberation of the Third Committee on the Rights of the Child. In doing so, allow me to congratulate the Secretary-General on his Report on the Status of the Convention on the Rights of the Child. I also thank the Special Representatives for Violence against Children, and for Children and Armed Conflict for their very useful reports. I would also commend UNICEF on its valuable work in promoting the rights and development of children.

In commending these Reports, it is important to point out that Jamaica’s national child protection framework is aligned to many elements outlined in the Reports, including legislative, administrative, social and educational action.

As the Minister with responsibility for children and youth since January 2012, the improvement of Jamaica’s record of child protection has been my focus. It is my conviction that a nation’s character must be measured by its determination to create a peaceful and just environment for all its citizens, especially its most vulnerable, which is, oftentimes, our children.

In this regard, we have been pursuing a policy-based agenda which is committed to the transformation of the culture of how the society cares for and protects children. It speaks to the responsibility of the State, as well as the seminal role to be played by parents. Our child protection actions are contained in the emerging National Framework of Action for Children 2012 – 2017, which includes the harmonization and modernization of new and existing legislation, placing greater emphasis on parental responsibility and building parental capacity to assume these responsibilities, advancing local and international collaboration, improving coordination of existing interventions, and providing increased resources for children’s programmes, as well as having a joined up Government approach towards ensuring that we address, holistically, children who come in conflict with the law.

Children have rights that must be protected and promoted. One such fundamental right is their right to a home and family. We have therefore placed family-based care arrangements among the priority child protection activities. Our “Living in Family Environments” (LIFE) programme is based on the fundamental premise that the best place for a child is in the home with loving and supportive family. We have over 5,600 children in State care and we have moved to a place where close to 56% of them now are in the Programme.

Another such is their right to participate in their own affairs. In recognition of this, child participation programmes are receiving significant attention in Jamaica’s child protection framework which is guided by the principle of the “best interests of the child”. We have, for example, established a Children’s Advisory Panel in July 2012; a Child Ambassadors programme in our school system earlier this year, which assists us to identify abused children, as often times children feel more comfortable speaking with their peers; and six (6) Children’s Councils were established in age-appropriate Children’s Homes.
Fundamental to an enabling environment for the care and protection of our children is the role of the State in providing the platform on which to build the necessary elements of security and peace through which children may be protected. Among the principal responses of the State in this regard is the creation, amendment and updating of new and existing legislation. Jamaica is currently reviewing and revising its primary legislation related to the care and protection of children and making every effort to review and harmonize all contiguous child-related legislation. This process will be complete by December 2013.

As part of this review, Jamaica is making legislative changes for the removal of the "uncontrollable behaviour" label ascribed to children who display extreme behavioural problems. These legal amendments will remove the option for Resident Magistrates/Judges in the courts to sentence such children to juvenile penal institutions and instead to place them in a therapeutic facility for psychological and psychiatric intervention to treat the causes of such behaviour. Funding is now being secured for the construction of such a facility and an Advisory Council of Psychiatrists has been created out of my Ministry.

In our continued desire to protect and uphold the rights of our children as per our own national laws and the Beijing Rules, all children have finally been removed, this year, from adult correctional centres where they were being held in separate dormitories from adults. Many children have been reintegrated with their families while others have been relocated to new children-only remand space created for children who come in conflict with the law.

Pursuant to the CRC’s recommendation that Jamaica establishes, a “mechanism to monitor the situation of children in conflict with the law”, I created in September last year the Inter-Ministerial Working Group on Children in Conflict with the Law. The Group comprises representatives of Ministries of Youth and Culture, Justice, Education, Finance and Planning, and National Security; the Police, the Correctional Services, Office of the Children’s Registry, Office of the Children’s Advocate and the Child Development Agency. The Working Group is forging a collaborative, integrated, systematic, and solution-oriented approach to dealing with issues of juvenile justice.

We recognize that, unfortunately, children will come in contact with the police from time to time either after committing an offence or when removed from abusive environments. In such cases, children deemed to be in “need of care and protection” as defined by the law are immediately placed in the care and protection of the State within the Children’s Homes and Places of Safety. Every effort is being made to adhere to Jamaican law and international protocols which require that children are placed before a Magistrate within 48 hours of being in the custody of the police.

At the same time, the Jamaican Government is moving to uphold international good practice by remodeling and retrofitting police stations with children-only holding areas so that they do not come in contact with adult detainees.
Work has started on the roll out of a national child diversion policy to reduce the number of children who are charged with an offence and exposed to the formal criminal justice system in order to increase the effectiveness of rehabilitation and to protect the rights of the child. Through our Multi-Agency Strategic Development for Child Protection Programme, agencies collaborate to provide children and families with counseling while diverting children from the criminal Justice System and from institutionalization. This process is far advanced and our pilot will be rolled out shortly.

Mr. Chairman,

Our efforts to promote and protect the rights of children must be multi-faceted if they are to be successful. As part of efforts to address the gender dimension of violence against children, Jamaica has instituted the National Policy of Reintegrating School-Aged Mothers into the Formal School System. At the same time, we are addressing violence in schools through expanding our Safe Schools Programme and pursuing an Anti-Bullying and Anti-Gang Initiatives to bring awareness to the issue while contributing to the reduction and elimination of such activities.

The Ministry that I lead continues to spearhead Jamaica’s planning and response for helping all in the society to be better nurturers of our children within the framework of the Convention on the Rights of the Child and in keeping with a progressive and robust National Children Policy.

Jamaica is forging closer relationships with local and international stakeholders, recognizing as we do, that we are all working towards the same objectives in the interest of our children. As Minister of Youth I have invited a broad range of civil society, private sector, government and student representatives to serve on a Children Support Task Force. The Task Force has been established to mobilize human and other resources, and achieve national consensus to better support child protection and strengthen the national framework. All stakeholders – local and international – will find that our Government is willing and ready to sit down and talk and to implement necessary action for our children.

Mr. Chairman,

I have given an illustration of a raft of activities and initiatives that Jamaica has undertaken within the past 15 months in furtherance of our commitment to the promotion and protection of the rights of children. For Jamaica, where our people are our most precious resource, safeguarding the rights of children is not just a legal or moral obligation but also a sound investment in our future. The global community, in elaborating the post-2015 development agenda, should seek to ensure that adequate attention is paid to the rights and development of children. Let us all work so that every child, everywhere is able to realize the benefits of his or her rights and achieve his or her full potential.

Thank you.