Statement by
H.E. Mr. Mahe Tupouniua, Ambassador and Permanent Representative
of the Kingdom of Tonga to the United Nations on Agenda Item 69: Promotion and Protection of Human Rights, at the 36th Meeting of the Third Committee of the 68th Session of the United Nations General Assembly
New York, 31st October 2013

Thank you, Mr. Chairman. The Delegation of the Kingdom of Tonga acknowledges with appreciation the relevant reports submitted by the Secretary - General.

Mr. Chairman,

I wish to take this opportunity to share some of Tonga’s successes and challenges in promoting and protecting its citizen’s human rights. Tonga continues to be successful in advancing human rights, though it still faces some obstacles. In order to continue this progress, however, genuine and durable partnerships with developed states are essential and are welcomed.

Mr. Chairman,

Tonga is committed to developing its already - favorable human rights record. In June this year, Tonga was lauded by both state and non- state actors for its serious engagement with the Universal Periodic Review process as well as for engaging without restriction with domestic and international human rights groups.

The people of Tonga are realizing their core political rights through Tonga’s recent transition to a democratic form of government. Parliamentary elections have been deemed generally free and fair. Tonga is continuing to develop this representative
framework. Tonga also protects and promotes civil rights to a high degree. Its people enjoy freedom of religion, and it is working on a plan to strengthen freedom of the press. The judicial and law enforcement systems operate according to the rule of law. The judiciary operates independently, as provided for in the Constitution. The Police Protection Act 2010 provides extensive protections against police abuses, and the Prisons Act 2010 provides the standard for the treatment of prisoners. Conditions generally meet international standards. National and local civil society groups are working to help people with disabilities realize their rights and combat discrimination. Education is compulsory, and the country has achieved near-universal literacy. Through these efforts and others, Tonga has realized one of the highest levels of human development in the Pacific.

However, Mr. Chairman, like all nations, Tonga struggles with some issues.

Corruption in government continues to affect Tonga. An independent commission addresses this problem by investigating complaints made against the government and works to resolve them. The government additionally worked to prosecute officials who may have abused their power. The protection of women’s rights also requires attention by the government. As outlined in Tonga’s Statement to your Committee Mr. Chairman on the 14th of October 2013, Tonga is taking a variety of steps to promote the advancement of women. A National Policy on gender and development focuses attention on critical women’s issues. In 2007, Tonga created a domestic violence unit in the police force, and in 2010, instituted a policy that prevents police from discretionarily dropping domestic violence charges. The police and civil society groups together have conducted domestic violence prevention campaigns. An increasing number of studies are being conducted on this topic, including ones by the government, and the government is increasingly cooperating with regional groups working on women’s rights. Tonga is continuing its efforts to ratify the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, albeit with reservations. In addition, more women are participating in government and the private sector at the highest levels, as, for instance, the Minister of Education, a number of CEOs of Government Ministries, a former Governor of the National Reserve Bank, and a President of the Chamber of Commerce and Industries.

Essential to making progress in all these areas, however, are resources and cooperation. Tonga acknowledges with gratitude the assistance it has already received from other countries, international organizations, and non-government organizations. Continued and increased assistance through genuine and durable partnerships is essential and is welcomed.
Mr. Chairman,

Despite Tonga’s level of human development, a significant number of its people still live in poverty. And, despite Tonga’s human rights successes, not all its people are able to fully enjoy their rights. An essential component in any progress on these issues is the cooperation of developed states.

While Tonga’s government are actively engaged in combatting violence against women, as described above, a major challenge facing both the police and the attorney general is a lack of funding. These institutions need both personnel and equipment to achieve their goals. In addition, Tonga has submitted reports to the treaty body under the Convention on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, but it also has reports outstanding. This has resulted from a scarcity of human and financial resources. Tonga is undertaking to improve its reporting record, but requires assistance in order to do so. Creating a national human rights institution is also a challenge for a state with a population of just over 100,000 and with limited resources. Qualified personnel and finances are needed. Tonga’s ability to promote and protect human rights is hindered in the absence of genuine and durable partnerships with the international community.

To this end, developed states are sought to engage Tonga and states like Tonga through such genuine and durable partnerships to assist in realizing our human rights aspirations.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.