**Minister for Foreign Affairs, Minister for Women**

**Senator the Hon. Marise Payne  
‘Dignitary address’ to the 45th Regular Session**

**of the United Nations Human Rights Council**

**14 September 2020**

Thank you Madam President, High Commissioner, Excellencies, and distinguished delegates.

COVID-19 is challenging the international system and all of our countries in truly unprecedented ways.

This pandemic reminds us that human rights are fundamental and central to all aspects of national and international governance.

This is something I know the High Commissioner is focused on – and I thank her for her leadership on the human rights dimensions of COVID-19.

COVID-19 has underscored the fact that governments and international institutions, like the UN Human Rights Council, need to find ways to balance different rights – for instance between public health and upholding civil and political rights.

Human rights are not peripheral to the COVID response; indeed, they must be central to our debates and our decision-making.

As the world faces this economic and social crisis, Australia firmly believes that nations that uphold principles domestically are more likely to cooperate in ways that promote the common good, respecting fundamental human rights and freedoms, and building them into the fabric of society, making the world – safer and more secure.

We know, unfortunately, that some countries - are invoking and misusing the emergency measures to undermine civil and political rights.

We also know the pandemic is having a significant impact on women and girls, the aged, people with disabilities, and others who may be in vulnerable situations.

And we know that, in some cases, states have used COVID-19 as a pretext for reducing or removing access to justice and consular assistance for people in detention.

In truth – and Australia’s experience and that of others’ demonstrates this – a strong focus on promoting and protecting human rights makes response and recovery efforts more effective and more sustainable.

It is equally important to ensure that the multilateral system is strong and effective – especially when it comes to institutions, rules, and norms relating to human rights.

COVID-19 is part of this, but we must also acknowledge that some institutions were not delivering effectively on their mandates before the pandemic…

…and that some states actively work against the norms and values that underpin the global order, including the international human rights system.

To this end, Australia continues to work to ensure international institutions are fit-for-purpose, effective, transparent and most importantly, accountable to member states.

Australia has worked hard during our term on the Council to oppose efforts that undermine long-established human rights.

As a proud, liberal democracy, we believe in the indivisibility, universality and inalienability of individual rights.

We were proud to lead a new resolution at the last session reaffirming the importance of respect for all human rights.

Australia is also proud of how we have delivered on other priorities for our term on the Council.

On gender equality, we have consistently advocated for the rights of women and girls, especially for an end to gender-based violence and discrimination, the promotion of women’s economic empowerment, and women’s meaningful participation in decision-making.

We have championed equal rights for LGBTI persons.

We have been pleased to lead the Council’s action on national human rights institutions, to advocate for the protection of human rights defenders, and to support opportunities for civil society to engage in Council processes.

We have also been clear and consistent in raising our voice:

* to champion the rights to freedom of expression, media freedom and freedom of religion or belief;
* to promote the rights of indigenous persons; and
* to oppose the death penalty, in all circumstances, for all people.

We understand the importance of working on these issues both inside and outside the Council.

We have joined groups such as the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance and International Religious Freedom Alliance.

We have also focused on holding other Council members to account, in line with the higher level of scrutiny and accountability that membership entails.

And we have been clear and consistent in raising human rights concerns.

More remains to be done to address these, including:

* concerning reports of repressive measures enforced against Uighurs and other ethnic minorities in Xinjiang…
* the ongoing conflict, restricted humanitarian access, the need for accountability for violations in Rakhine and elsewhere in Myanmar…
* and legislation related to national security on Hong Kong, which has eroded rights and freedoms guaranteed to the people on Hong Kong.

We see the systematic violations of human rights in the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea; the erosion of democratic institutions in Venezuela through the corruption of judicial and electoral processes; and the horrific humanitarian toll of conflict in Yemen and Syria.

As our first term on the Council draws to a close, we are pleased to see its membership diversify, especially to include more nations, now three, from the Pacific.

While we fully comprehend the gravity of the challenges posed to the international human rights system, Australia reiterates its firm and enduring support for the Human Rights Council.

In 2021 and beyond, Australia will continue to play an active role in the Council.

We will be guided by our commitment to strengthening the international human rights system and to upholding and protecting universal human rights.

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