

Op-ed on Human Rights Day

“Building a resilient Ghana means putting people first and leaving no one behind”

By: Mr. Charles Abani, UN Resident Coordinator for Ghana

Traveling across the country, either to observe critical interventions by the UN in Ghana in some parts of Ghana, or for leisure to savor the rich taste of culture, customs, and cuisine, it is unquestionable that Ghanaians are warm, hospitable and above all, resilient. Throughout my engagement as the Resident Coordinator with the leadership and people of Ghana across various spheres, I have observed this country’s strong desire and commitment to build a resilient and self-reliant nation, one that is just and equitable with a peaceful and inclusive disposition. This vision is encapsulated in the country’s 1992 Constitution, enjoining all governments to: “... take all necessary action to ensure that the national economy is managed in such a manner as to maximize the rate of economic development and to secure the maximum welfare, freedom and happiness of every person in Ghana and to provide adequate means of livelihood and suitable employment and public assistance to the needy.” (Article 36, Clause 1)

Admirably Ghana is making gains even in difficult times. Despite the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, Ghana has relatively managed to remain steady, defying global economic trends to achieve a positive GDP growth rate in 2020 - a feat attributable to effective policies and measures and made possible by ordinary Ghanaians – tilling the soil each day to make sure there is enough and healthy food for all; transporting the produce, people, goods and services across the country; tutor the Ghanaian student from nursery through to University; apply themselves in resilient small businesses that contribute to livelihoods and growth; a youth population that is keen to play its part, and those who work to make sure the systems function as they ought to; and who maintain and keep the peace that we enjoy.

We must recognise, respect, acknowledge and appreciate every single Ghanaian for their contribution to the process of development and create prosperity and equal opportunity for all regardless of where they live, their gender or race, or their religious, cultural or ethnic background. It is on this basis that the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) was adopted in 1948 by the United Nations General Assembly.

The UDHR principles are universal and inalienable; indivisible; interdependent and interrelated. They are universal because everyone is born with and possesses the same rights - *Inalienable* because people’s rights can never be taken away; *Indivisible* and *interdependent* because all rights – political, civil, social, cultural and economic – are equal in importance and none can be fully enjoyed without the others. They apply to all equally, and all have the right to participate in decisions that affect their lives.

The UDHR, of which Ghana is a signatory, are upheld by the rule of law and strengthened through legitimate claims for duty-bearers to be accountable to international standards. Today, Ghana is a party to fourteen human rights treaties, which affirms its belief in rights for

all, and as such has an obligation to take steps to ensure that every Ghanaian enjoys the rights contained in these treaties.

By providing the necessary technical support and impetus for the integration of human rights in its policies, directives, and regulations, taking into cognizance the country's cultural and belief systems, the United Nations in Ghana walks alongside Ghana to take the steps required to meet its human rights obligations. The UN also supports Ghana's participation in the Universal Periodic Review (UPR), a State-driven process of review of Member States' human rights records under the auspices of the Human Rights Council. Currently, there are seven treaties that are pending review with the most recent reviewed treaties being the Convention on Civil and Political Rights and the Convention on the Rights of the Child, reviewed in 2020.

As one of the main features of the Human Rights Council, the UPR is designed to ensure equal treatment for every country when their human rights situations are assessed. The quintessential aim of this mechanism is to improve the human rights situation in all countries and address human rights violations wherever they occur. Currently, no other universal mechanism of this kind exists. The UN will continue to work with the Government of Ghana, through the Commission on Human Rights and Administrative Justice (CHRAJ) and other key bodies to facilitate the review process and keep these requirements up to date.

On Human Rights Day, which falls on December 10 each year, Member States are reminded of their responsibility and obligation to every one of their citizens irrespective of race, colour, sex, religious, cultural or ethnic background.

Despite progress made, much work remains to be done, at all levels across the globe and as well as in Ghana, to address the gaps and rights of all Ghanaians, especially those who face particular exclusions – women especially those who provide domestic services, persons with disability, the elderly, children, young people (especially adolescent girls), those facing victimisation from harmful traditional practices and beliefs, persons of LGBTIQI+ identification, and other minority groups such as prisoners, refugees, migrants, and others. This includes, at the global level for example, pressure on the rights of all peoples to access the COVID-19 vaccines at an affordable rate and find ways to address other global inequities. At a country level, it is also important to continue to assure broader citizenry rights already enshrined in Ghana's constitution – around freedoms of movement, the right to free speech, access to information, assembly and protest, and freedom for the media, among others. As we observe processes in Ghana, we join the call of many well-meaning Ghanaians, to treat these conversations with the weight they deserve, in a manner that is respectful and with the necessary caution that on the one hand ensures Ghana continues to take its rightful place, while preserving cherished values and taking account, not just of the majority views – but protecting all minority rights. This is never an easy road to walk. Courage of conviction is key.

Ghana is also reminded of its obligation to uphold the documents it has signed on to. Human Rights Day provides an excellent opportunity for the international community to reflect on the state of their human rights records and take concrete steps and accelerate action to heed to their obligations.

For Ghana, this year presents a unique opportunity to test the human rights processes and to engage with and defend itself from any such measures or actions that hinder the full

realization of the human rights of its citizens. The rise of abuse, discrimination, and disregard for one another, and especially for particular groups of people, observed in recent times, must not be normalized and accepted – in my short experience with Ghana, I believe this is not inherently “Ghanaian”.

From the UN’s perspective, achieving the 2030 Agenda of the SDGs can only be accomplished if we work to reduce inequalities and assure the rights of every single citizen. It really is essential.

The theme for the 2021 Human Rights Day, “Equality - Reducing inequalities, advancing human rights” offers a moment of reflection on the state of human rights the world over, Ghana included.

As we build back better, we must do so with everyone on board. Our collective action is stronger, forceful and bigger than our individual push. We must widen the space to include all views, perspectives, skills, knowledge and expertise in the process of development. Only then can we drive the change we want to see.

Furthermore, it is important to make every single Ghanaian feel a sense of belonging. This mindset is intrinsic to achieving Ghana’s laudable ambition to become a wealthy, inclusive, sustainable, environmentally-aware, and resilient (WISER) nation as it marches towards Ghana Beyond Aid. This is the position as contained in the UN Charter, developed by nations including Ghana, and in the UDHR. The UN in Ghana stands fully committed to supporting Ghana on this and its development priorities as it strides confidently forward to realize its ambition.