



United Arab Emirates

Speech

His Excellency Dr Anwar Mohammed Gargash
Minister of State for Foreign Affairs

Working Group of the Universal Periodic Review
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Thank you, Mr President.

On behalf of the United Arab Emirates, I am honored to return to Geneva to discuss the progress we have made in implementing the recommendations from our first Universal Periodic Review, in 2008.

With my colleagues, I thank the countries that participated in the Working Group for our review, and the Troika of Germany, Thailand, and Ethiopia. I would like to convey to all of you who are here today the warm greetings of the people of the UAE.

At the outset, let me express the UAE's appreciation for the review process and the opportunity it gives us to have this open dialogue with the international community. The UPR process represents a beacon for the cause of human rights worldwide.

The dialogue we are having in Geneva today presents an unparalleled opportunity for us to promote a transparent and inclusive approach to human rights. It is an opportunity we fully embrace and value.

Mr President,

It is my pleasure to introduce our delegation, which is comprised of several officials who have very ably supported the compilation of a report on human rights in the UAE. Our delegation also includes members from civil society groups who were involved in the preparation of this report.

Since the 2008 UPR, the UAE Government has made it a priority to put into practice the outcomes of the review. In 2010, we set up a committee specifically to support the objective of ensuring that we are following through on our commitments under the UPR. The committee is comprised of government bodies, both federal and local, and advisers from civil society organizations. It now acts as a permanent forum for the consultative process with civil society in the UAE.

The committee developed a plan to implement the outcome of the review, working closely with a host of national actors. Feedback on a draft of the plan was sought from government ministries, civil society associations and our national assembly - the Federal National Council.

I would like to take a moment to acknowledge and thank our own civil society, for their contribution to the review. Their participation was a centerpiece of our UPR process. In the course of the consultations and engagement they had with the committee over the last two years our citizens and civil society organizations have shared their views on human rights in the UAE. Much of this input is reflected in the report.

Following our last consultative meeting with civil society the draft report was put on the committee's website in order to enable all our citizens to participate in the discussion about advancing human rights in the UAE.

The final national report was submitted to the Human Rights Council in October 2012 but our dialogue with civil society and other stakeholders in the UAE continues.

Mr President,

This report demonstrates the efforts the UAE has made to implement the findings of the review, and the continuous progress we are making.

During the UAE's first review, many countries put forward questions regarding the UAE's human rights record. Recommendations were made covering a wide range of human rights issues, including the ratification of international human rights treaties, national implementation of human rights commitments, the rights of workers, and the rights of women and children.

The UAE Government accepted 36 recommendations and made 9 additional voluntary pledges. More than 90 per cent of these were implemented.

Details of the actions we took are in the report, which provides a specific response to each recommendation. In the course of this intervention, I would like to discuss a few thematic areas that these recommendations covered, and review some of the significant progress that has occurred during the last four years.

Mr President,

The UAE has a stable political system characterized by a consultative relationship between its citizens and its government, the application of the rule of law and good governance. This is underpinned by a Constitution which guarantees the rights of UAE citizens.

The UAE's political system has evolved over time in response to the needs of a modern nation state, while staying consistent with its traditions.

We take pride in our achievements but we are never satisfied with the status quo. Let me be clear: we *are* facing challenges. I will not stand here in front of you, and say that we have a spotless record in the UAE. Indeed, I am not aware of any country that does.

In a difficult and unstable region, and in a country with a rapidly growing population, a large percentage of whom are expatriates, our approach to human rights is inevitably an evolving one.

What we do have is a strong commitment to improve the situation. I can assure you that the UAE government takes concerns of any possible violation of human rights very seriously and that we are constantly working on strengthening our capacity to respond to these.

We will continue to take this proactive approach, in a way that is consistent with our constitution, laws and traditions, to address or prevent situations which threaten or violate human rights.

Mr President,

It is a central duty of any Government to ensure that it has adequate legislation and institutions in place to ensure the rights of its people are protected.

Since the first UPR, the UAE has comprehensively reviewed its constitution and laws in order to implement systems that effectively protect human rights. This process entailed undertaking significant reforms, details of which are in the report. Allow me though to highlight a few developments in this regard.

The UAE Constitution was amended in 2009. Among other changes, the tenure of Federal National Council members was extended to four years, in order to allow its members to complete a comprehensive term of parliamentary work. This is in line with international parliamentary standards.

The remit of the FNC has also now been expanded to include a role in debating international treaties and international conventions undertaken by the government.

During recent years, the UAE has also implemented diverse legislative initiatives to address other human rights issues, including the enactment of several measures to strengthen the rights of workers, and the amendment of legislation on the rights of people with disabilities.

The UAE accepted two recommendations on protecting children's rights at the last review and as a result we are in the process of adopting a federal law concerning children's rights. The law includes a number of measures that are designed to protect children and prescribes penalties for breaching its provisions.

More details related to the progress of human rights legislation in the UAE are set out in our report.

The UAE also understands the importance of promoting *institutional* frameworks that aim to strengthen the protection of human rights. As our report shows, several departments and governmental entities concerned with human rights have been established at both federal and domestic levels during the past few years.

A group of recommendations that we received during the first review, as well as questions submitted in advance of this session by the Netherlands and the United Kingdom, concerned the establishment of a national human rights institution in the UAE. We remain committed to taking this recommendation forward and have taken a series of important steps in order to realize it.

Mr President,

A number of the recommendations in 2008 called on the UAE government to do more to ratify treaties and other international instruments.

We appreciate that our engagement with the international community in the field of human rights must be multifaceted, including studying the accession to international conventions, cooperating with treaty bodies and special procedures, undertaking the UPR and cooperating with the activities of the Human Rights Council. On each of these levels, the UAE has done much to comply with internationally-accepted standards.

The UAE has acceded to various international conventions, including the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, the International Convention on the Elimination of All forms of Racial Discrimination, the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (whose optional protocol we signed in 2010), the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, the Convention on Transnational Organized Crime and the Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, especially Women and Children.

The UAE also recently joined the Convention against Torture and other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, formally acceding to that Convention last July. We will also continue the process of joining the optional protocols on child involvement in armed conflicts and the optional protocol on child exploitation in pornography.

We continue to review and actively consider ratification of other international human rights instruments.

Acknowledging the vital role that this cooperation plays in advancing human rights, the UAE welcomes visits by Special Rapporteurs in accordance with its customary practice and international commitments. In October 2009, the UAE received the UN Special Rapporteur on the Sale of Children, Child Prostitution and Child Pornography, and the UN Special Rapporteur on Racism and Racial Discrimination. In April 2012 the UAE received a visit from the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Trafficking in Persons.

In the second quarter of 2013, the UAE will host the United Nations Working Group on Business and Human Rights. The Working Group offers an invaluable service by assembling the world's largest business-focused team of human rights specialists.

Mr President,

The UAE's status as an attractive place of work for people from around the world has led it to become a major recipient of foreign labor, which benefits both the foreign workers and the UAE.

The UAE has an extensive strategy for safeguarding the rights of workers and improving their work and living conditions. This is a matter of national interest, as well as a human rights issue, as foreign workers are our development partners and their contribution to the growth of our economy is invaluable.

We are fully committed to the goal of strengthening the rights of workers so that they can enjoy opportunity in the UAE, free of any form of abuse or exploitation.

We have undertaken a series of measures that create more flexibility and freedom in the labor market. These include: regulations protecting the rights of workers in case of disputes with employers and providing access to litigation processes; measures guaranteeing decent and safe accommodation for workers; and provisions regarding medical care and rights for workers to move from one job to another without time limitations.

The UAE has also entered into a series of memoranda of understanding with major labor-exporting countries, including India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, China and the Philippines, designed to facilitate efforts to protect workers from exploitation.

Ensuring the fair and on-time protection of workers remains a critical priority for labor policy enforcement. A new wage protection system introduced in 2009 helps to ensure that this objective is met by facilitating the transfer of salaries to workers via authorized banks and exchange companies. One notable feature of the system is that it allows the Ministry of Labor to monitor the process of transferring salaries through a comprehensive database. As a result, 3.5 million workers in more than 215,000 enterprises are ensured payment protection.

As mentioned earlier, the government adopted general standards related to workers' residencies and access to amenities.

These stressed the responsibility of employers to provide a suitable residency for workers that is in line with internationally-approved standards. It is based on these standards that the UAE continues to work on the construction of residential worker cities. Currently, there are 21 such cities in the UAE, which host approximately 345,000 workers.

Importantly, the government has recently approved a new law to protect domestic workers, which will be issued this year and will afford them far greater protection and assurances. This new law particularly benefits women, who make up a major portion of this segment of the workforce.

The UAE has worked hard to protect the rights of the different communities that contribute to the country's growth and development. For example, the right to practice religion freely is a firmly protected right. This is why the UAE has numerous mosques, churches, Hindu temples and other places of worship for the diverse population of workers that reside there.

Mr President,

It is always a pleasure for me to talk about women's rights because I have seen the great things that can be achieved by women when they are given the opportunity.

A few years ago, the Prime Minister of the UAE, His Highness Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum, famously observed: "A place without women is a place without spirit". Indeed, without a large number of women in leadership positions, the UAE would have greatly lacked in creativity and confidence.

Women now occupy thirty per cent of higher leadership and decision-making positions in the UAE and participate meaningfully in every facet of civic and political life. In addition, in December 2012 the UAE Cabinet made it compulsory for corporations and government agencies to include women on their boards of directors.

Just last week, the UAE made history when a woman chaired a session of the Federal National Council for the first time. In 2011, the same Dr Amal Al Qubaisi was the first woman to be elected as the FNC's Deputy Speaker. Seven women now serve in the FNC and the UAE now has female federal judges.

Women occupy two thirds of the jobs in federal government - one of the highest percentages worldwide. There are four female ministers in the Federal Cabinet, which is one of the highest ratios in the Arab world. Women occupy seventy five per cent of positions in the education and health sectors.

Women are major contributors to the UAE's economy. Official statistics indicate that the Businesswomen Council in the UAE has more than 12,000 members who run more than 11,000 ventures, with an estimated value of \$3.4 billion. Women also occupy more than one third of the jobs in banking and finance, one of the major economic sectors in the country.

Ninety five per cent of female high school graduates go on to pursue higher education as do eighty per cent of their male counterparts. Currently, seventy per cent of all graduates from UAE universities are women. Women in the UAE work in jobs that are not considered traditional jobs for women in a conservative Muslim society. For example, women have been certified as fighter pilots in the UAE Air Force.

In 2011, the UAE took another important step in cementing the rights of women when the President, His Highness Sheikh Khalifa bin Zayed Al Nahyan, issued a decree addressing the issue of children born to Emirati women but whose father is not Emirati. It accords them citizenship rights and at the age of eighteen they have the choice of taking UAE nationality or retaining the father's nationality.

It is not surprising then that according to the UN Gender Inequality Index for 2011 the UAE ranked as the 38th most gender equal in the world and one of the most gender-equal Arab countries.

The UAE's election to the membership of the Executive Council of UN Women for a three-year term from 2013 to 2015 is a clear indication of the international community's confidence in the UAE's achievements in this field.

Women's empowerment is something the UAE continues to be proud of but our work does not end here. The government is taking the implementation of recommendations on women's rights very seriously and is in the process of adopting a National Strategy for the Advancement of Women for 2013 to 2017.

Mr President,

The UAE is committed to the global effort to combat human trafficking and is taking a lead on this issue regionally. It was the first country in the Arab region to enact a comprehensive anti-trafficking law.

Remarkable progress was made between 2007 and 2012 on the UAE's four-part anti-trafficking strategy, which focused on: developing legislation and regulations related to human trafficking; guiding the relevant authorities towards implementing preventive and deterrent measures; securing protection and support for the victims of these crimes; and promoting regional and international cooperation to combat human trafficking.

With a view to raising awareness about human trafficking and building the capacity of law-enforcement officers to tackle this heinous crime, the UAE National Committee on Countering Human Trafficking has organized a series of training courses and workshops during the last four years, involving various government agencies and institutions concerned with the welfare of the victims of human trafficking.

Other highlights of the UAE's anti-trafficking activities in recent years include: an expanded media campaign to enhance public awareness about the crime of human trafficking; a strategy to combat all forms of forced labor through the imposition of heavy fines; and an expansion in the number of shelters for women and children who are victims of human trafficking and sexual exploitation. These shelters provide care for victims of human trafficking in line with the highest international standards.

Furthermore, the UAE Cabinet strengthened the National Committee to Combat Human Trafficking and submitted for ratification an amendment to Federal Law No. 51 on combating human trafficking in order to bring it in line with the Palermo Protocol.

Mr President,

At the last review, the UAE committed itself to continue to provide foreign aid to developing countries. The UAE continues to be one of the most generous Arab donor countries.

In 2011, the UAE disbursed a total of USD \$2.1 billion in grants and loans to development, humanitarian, and charity programs worldwide. These funds have been provided to more than 120 countries. We will continue to be at the forefront of efforts to alleviate the humanitarian and development challenges faced by other states.

One other recommendation asked the UAE to devote particular attention to organizing workshops focused on spreading human rights principles among law enforcement authorities in charge of combating terrorism. Both the UAE Ministry of Interior and the Ministry of Justice have held seminars and training courses for law-enforcement officers to ensure that human rights and the rule of law are protected when counter-terrorism measures are taken.

Another group of recommendations that we accepted concerned the development of infrastructure in remote areas of the UAE. Major progress has been achieved in this area since then and this commitment is being honored. A series of government initiatives, with an estimated cost of \$4.4 billion, have contributed to the development of housing, water and electricity utilities, roads and bridges, and hospitals and health care centers in remote areas of the UAE.

Mr President,

Allow me to say a few words by way of closing. While we recognize that the UAE will continually need to review and enhance its efforts to protect people's human rights, the level of protection of human rights already achieved represents a significant success.

Two months ago, we celebrated our 41st anniversary as a nation. We are a young country but one that continues to be proud of the progress it has made in a short time. According to the UN's Human Development Index, the UAE has the highest level of human development in the Arab world.

We take pride in the fact that the people of the UAE have a high level of well-being; that ours is a tolerant and multicultural society in a region that has long been beset by multiple and complex challenges; that the empowerment of women has been one of our notable success stories; that all citizens have a right to education and access to healthcare; that we are pioneers in promoting

sustainable development and clean energy; and that people from over 200 nationalities residing in the UAE worship freely in churches, temples and mosques.

There is no doubt that the turbulence in the Arab world of the last two years has presented all countries in the region with extraordinary challenges. Within this context, the UAE has worked to maintain its stability and security, to protect the progressive nature of our society, and to prevent extremism from gaining a foothold.

Every country has to find the right balance between preserving civil liberties and maintaining national security. This is not always easy, especially in volatile and rapidly changing contexts. The UAE has not shied away from its responsibility to protect national security but it has done so, and will continue to do so, strictly within the framework of our constitution, our laws and our judicial practices, while respecting international human rights principles.

Mr President,

The UAE's progress has not always come easy but we have worked hard to set new standards in the protection of human rights and we will continue to do so. At the same time, we acknowledge the remaining challenges and reiterate our resolve to meet them, based on the bedrock principle that governments must act with fairness and equity to protect the rights of people.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak about the importance we attach to human rights in the United Arab Emirates. We hope that our response today fully demonstrates the UAE's commitment both to human rights and to multilateral engagement through the UPR.

END STATEMENT