



SAINT VINCENT AND THE GRENADINES

Opening Statement

By

H.E. I. Rhonda King

Permanent Representative of Saint Vincent and the Grenadines to the United
Nations in New York

before the

Human Rights Council

**Twenty-fifth Session of the Working Group on the Universal Periodic
Review**

2 May, 2016

Geneva, Switzerland

Please check against delivery

Mr. President, Excellencies, Distinguished ladies and gentlemen,

Saint Vincent and the Grenadines is pleased to return to the Universal Periodic Review, on the occasion of the second cycle review of the human rights record and accomplishments of its people and successive governments. We look forward to engaging in dialogue with members of the Human Rights Council, and by extension other members of the international community during the review process. We anticipate a fruitful and mutually rewarding experience from this important and indispensable learning exercise. It is envisaged that Saint Vincent and the Grenadines will gain greater insight into international human rights issues, which will engender a greater understanding of international human rights priorities. It is hoped that this discourse will bring about a fuller appreciation of the practical challenges faced by Small Island Developing States in fulfilling their human rights obligations.

Saint Vincent and the Grenadines appreciates the contributions of all States that submitted questions in advance for our consideration, many of which will be addressed in the course of this opening statement. We are grateful to the members of our Troika, namely Latvia, Mongolia and Mexico for the preparatory role they performed throughout this entire review process. Similarly, mention must be made of the good work of the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights for producing the various compilations which will guide our discussions.

Mr. President,

The human rights framework in Saint Vincent and the Grenadines is informed by our history of British colonialism, our geographic composition as a small, multi-island State and the deeply held convictions of a sovereign people. The Government has a policy of promoting, protecting and respecting the fundamental human rights of all individuals and reconfirms its deep and abiding commitment to the advancement of human rights. Indeed, arising out of the commendations and recommendations made during the first review, the Government was inspired to redouble its efforts to ensure that Vincentians live in a fair and just society.

Saint Vincent and the Grenadines submitted its second cycle Universal Periodic Review report in January this year. The report's methodology focused heavily on community and focus group consultations, as well as a series of state and non-state agency-structured interviews.

Saint Vincent and the Grenadines is a plural and fully inclusive parliamentary democracy and our elected Governments are similarly inclusive and diverse. Over sixty percent of senior positions in Government are held by women, including past and present Ambassadors in our Embassies abroad, many senior judicial officers, the former Deputy Prime Minister, the Attorney General, the Cabinet Secretary and Senators in the Government and Opposition. There is an active free press with three weekly and editorially independent newspapers. There is freedom of expression and assembly which are constitutionally protected, and a lively unregulated Internet blogosphere.

Mr. President,

Our national circumstances dictate, to a large extent, our approach to human rights development and improvement. Since our last review, the Government has progressively sought to further develop and advance human rights by strengthening its national institutional and legislative legal framework. The enhancement of our national human rights framework is premised not only on our ability to enact legislation, but is an all-inclusive approach which is responsive to the needs and demands of the Vincentian people.

The present Constitution of Saint Vincent and the Grenadines was adopted from Britain at the time of our independence. In 2009, the Government, in collaboration with all relevant stakeholders locally and within the diaspora, unsuccessfully attempted Constitutional reform via a referendum. The proposed reforms included the creation of a Human Rights Commission and an Ombudsman, as well as numerous innovations and advancements in governance and human rights. Unfortunately, the lead-up to the referendum, which had originally been bi-partisan, became highly politicized. Outside of its consideration in the context of Constitutional reform, and the existing human rights association, there have not been any national consultations on the topic of the establishment of a National Human Rights institution.

The Constitution, as the supreme law of the land, expressly guarantees the protection of the right to life, personal liberty, freedom of conscience, expression, association and movement. It further provides protection from slavery, torture, inhuman treatment, deprivation of property, arbitrary search or entry, discrimination on the grounds of sex, race, place of origin, political opinions, color or creed and secures protection of the law, including the right to a fair hearing and presumption of innocence.

Recognizing our responsibility to adhere to international human rights standards, we have ratified several key international human rights treaties since our last review. The State has a record of always supporting international agreements which uphold a respect for international human rights, and is doing its utmost best to bring itself in compliance with all other outstanding agreements, including the Kampala amendments.

During the recently concluded 31st session of the Human Rights Council, the delegation of Saint Vincent and the Grenadines outlined the Government's intention of establishing a National Mechanism for Reporting and Follow-up. My delegation is pleased to inform that Cabinet is now actively considering the proposal, which should be passed very soon. The National Mechanism on Reporting and Follow-up will review and expedite compliance with our outstanding treaty obligations. Additionally, we reiterate and echo the sentiments other CARICOM States have made to the Human Rights Council for an accompanying offer of additional technical and capacity-building support in this regard.

Mr. President,

Saint Vincent and the Grenadines as a sovereign and independent State must protect the most vulnerable and needy among its population within its existing and available resources. As outlined in our national report, several pieces of forward thinking legislations and policy measures were introduced in this regard. As you are aware, the Ministries of Legal Affairs within Small Island Developing States are heavily burdened with the day-to-day tasks of lawmaking. We not only have tiny staffs, but also a myriad of other proposed legislation to encourage and

foster national development and address urgent and pressing challenges. Similarly, within our sub-regional groups such as CARICOM and the Organization of the Eastern Caribbean States, there is the added responsibility of attempting to harmonize laws to allow for better regional integration and cooperation. Nevertheless, the Government prioritized the enactment of three new pieces of legislations namely a new Domestic Violence Act of 2015, the Child Care and Adoption Act of 2010 and the Status of Children Act 2011 aimed at strengthening the domestic legal human rights framework.

By ratifying the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women and complying with the Beijing Platform, the Governments comprising the Organisation of Eastern Caribbean States re-committed their quest to eradicate violence against women. The Domestic Violence Act, which was passed in May 2015, is a manifestation of that noble goal. The legislation is quite extensive. The term “domestic violence” is wide, and includes any controlling or abusive behavior that harms the health, safety or well-being of a person or any child and includes physical abuse or threats, sexual abuse or threats, economic abuse and stalking. It also widened the narrow definition of “domestic relationship”, allowing more persons to fall into this category, and obtain redress. The Legislation particularly makes it mandatory for a Police Officer to respond to every complaint or report alleging domestic violence, whether or not the person making the complaint or report is the victim. The Act is yet another important step in ensuring a more fair and just society.

Mr. President,

Saint Vincent and the Grenadines can reflect with pride on the development of its post-independence human rights record.

On April 19, 2016 the Government launched its National Child Protection Policy Framework in collaboration with UNICEF our key donor partner in the process. The UNICEF representative for Barbados and the Eastern Caribbean, Klin Sandi Lwin described Saint Vincent and the Grenadines as a trailblazer, as it was the first country in the Eastern Caribbean to adopt a National Child Protection Policy. Our Government has also gone a few steps further to establish

a Division strictly for the protection and rehabilitation of children called the Child Development Division in 2016 to handle matters of this nature.

Similarly, efforts are being made towards the completion of minor amendments and harmonization of existing legislations, as well as the development of child care and adoption regulations to adequately implement the Status of Children Act of 2011, the Child Care and Adoption Act of 2010 and the Domestic Violence Act of 2015. Simultaneously, efforts are also being made to finalize the Draft Child Justice Bill which will seek to further protect children even when they have offended or are in conflict with the law. The policy hopes to provide a macro-based legal and social protection strategy aimed at strengthening national protection systems, supporting social change, promoting child protection in conflict situations and natural disasters, building evidence and knowledge management and convening, as well as catalyzing agents of change.

The Government has also recently approved a repositioning of the National Committee on the Rights of the Child to provide a national regulatory function to the State's National Machinery on the protection of children nationally. The Government acknowledges and takes very seriously its role in ensuring the upholding of the human rights of its most vulnerable citizens.

Mr. President,

As outlined in our report, the Government of Saint Vincent and the Grenadines has implemented a series of measures to monitor and oversee the welfare of juvenile offenders. Through a Juvenile Justice Reform programme formulated by way of in-depth national and community consultations, a systemic approach was developed to monitor and protect the welfare of juvenile offenders nationally. The Legislation and Policy Framework for Child Justice which seeks to ensure the maximization of this approach will be tabled for Parliament soon and seeks to provide ample diversion and detention modalities using restorative practices. This systemic approach includes a National Diversion Programme that endeavours to ensure youth development, skills

and academic advancement, parenting support, therapeutic interventions and rehabilitation, while also ensuring effective re-integration. This Programme officially commenced on April 26, 2016. There is also a Secure Treatment Facility for juveniles in need of detention that focuses on the usage of restorative practices.

The Government continues to strengthen its national policy framework on gender based violence. Saint Vincent and the Grenadines developed a National Action Plan geared towards ending gender-based violence. This National Action Plan was developed to train, empower and strengthen the domestic violence responding system and communities in ending gender-based violence. There is an ongoing Anti-violence Campaign that commenced in 2014, which focuses primarily on increasing awareness of gender-based violence issues to children and communities. Approximately two thousand participants were reached in this campaign during the period October 2014 to October 2015, and it is anticipated that an additional 2500 persons will be reached in this new reporting period more so at the community level as an estimated 70% of schools participated in the previous campaign. The campaign seeks to identify the causes of domestic violence as well as community and school-based solutions to ending domestic violence at different levels. It is a collaborative response coordinated by the newly reformed Gender Development Division, which includes the Police, Medical Practitioners, Legal Officers, Counselors, Political Leaders, Religious Leaders and Domestic Violence Survivors.

To strengthen support for advancing the cause for an anti-violence campaign, a Victims' Support Programme was established within the same reporting period to provide psycho-social and socio-economic support to existing victims of domestic violence nationally. Since its inception, a minimum of 75% of the victims of reported cases of domestic violence have participated in this programme, and in 2016, two additional Victim Support Programme Centres have been established.

Another tier of the Anti-violence Campaign focuses on children as the perpetrators of violent acts. This tier of the campaign was simultaneously launched in 2014 also targeting schools and communities aimed at increasing the awareness of causes of conflict amongst children and establishing solutions to ending conflict and violence amongst children. 100% of all secondary schools and 40% of primary schools were reached as at October 2015. This resulted in the

development of key programme interventions through sports, the drafting of legislations identifying alternative sentencing programmes for children in conflict with the law, as well as alternative options for parents, to be provided with adequate tools to address negative behavioural traits in children. While corporal punishment of children is still a legal sentence for crime in the State, it has not been applied and practiced in over twenty years.

Mr. President,

The Government's response in protecting the rights of persons living with and affected by HIV/AIDS has been swift as it recognises that this epidemic has serious developmental implications if not addressed. The Government established various partnerships locally and internationally with the Pan American Health Organisation and other key stakeholders to develop a national strategic plan to address the HIV/AIDS pandemic, stigma and discrimination faced by persons living with and affected by HIV/AIDS. The Government plans to introduce social protection legislation that seeks to remove all social status barriers and stigmas from individuals based on their socio-economic conditions or status. This seeks to maximize on a national policy protecting vulnerable groups and promoting increased and equal access to available resources to ensure the protection and support for vulnerable groups.

My delegation is also pleased to report that cases of mother-to-child transmission of HIV have been kept at almost zero in Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, and this was possible because of the efforts being made towards addressing HIV and AIDS and providing psycho-social support in the country.

Mr. President,

The Government continues to implement forward-looking policies aimed at improving and ensuring an adequate standard of living for all as articulated in our National Report. Considerable investments were made in housing development by way of the provision of low

income and middle income housing, and more recently, the "Lives to Live" programme which commenced in 2015 and is designed to assist persons in the no-income and vulnerable group focusing on persons with disabilities.

The Government continues to support health and education by applying a series of innovative approaches in these areas. There is equal access to reproductive health services which are offered free of charge for all citizens of Saint Vincent and the Grenadines in the forty-one clinics across the nation. No one is exempt from sexual reproductive health service, except for medical reasons or where parental consideration is required.

The rate of school dropouts has also been addressed by way of investments in Early Childhood Education, the incorporation of ICT in Education as a means of making the classroom a more dynamic and interactive environment. There is the provision of extra- curricular activities such as opportunities to learn to play the steel pan and developing small business skills through the management of poultry and vegetable farms, and the creation of child friendly school environments.

The Government's ongoing Economically Disadvantaged Student Loan Programme enables tertiary level pupils to access higher education with the Government of Saint Vincent and the Grenadines acting as guarantor for their loans.

There are various measures already in place to prevent early pregnancy, including the Pan Against Crime Initiative, Youth Empowerment Programme, Adolescent Youth Groups at Health Centres and a Teen Prevention Programme at various schools across the country. Our policy interventions are designed to support the reintegration of adolescent mothers into the school system which includes parenting programmes and sexual reproductive services at no cost. We are very encouraged that these interventions have been identified as a "best practice" by the United Nations Populations Fund.

The development of innovative programmes such as the Support for Education and Training programme and the Youth Empowerment Services exposes young persons to the workforce, improves their marketability and skills.

Mr. President,

The Government continues to strive to achieve zero hunger and zero undernourishment. In June 2013, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines was recognised by the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organisation for achieving the twin goals of the Millennium Development Goals and the FAO's World Food Summit's target of more than halving the number of hungry or undernourished people, absolutely and proportionality, between 1992 and 2012.

To complement these existing efforts, the Government further demonstrated its unyielding commitment to the zero hunger initiative by announcing in February 2016 its intention to introduce new fiscal measures, which are expected to generate EC\$2.7 million (US\$1 million) towards the Zero Hunger Trust Fund, that will support efforts to eliminate hunger in Saint Vincent and the Grenadines. This people-centred approach redounds to the benefit of our most vulnerable citizens. In fact, even before the adoption of the Sustainable Development Goals, the Government of Saint Vincent and the Grenadines set a national goal of achieving zero hunger by the year 2020. A part of that goal was the establishment of a Parliamentary Front against Hunger and undernourishment. This bi-partisan agreement aims at strengthening political commitment and action towards inclusive governance for the full implementation of the National Zero Hunger Challenge Initiative Action Plan. The ZHTF is designed to achieve the following objectives: ascertain the precise extent of hunger in Saint Vincent and the Grenadines; establish action-oriented programmes in education and training, health and wellness, housing, employment and productive work, strengthening social safety nets; to ensure that the targeted beneficiaries be transformed into self-sufficient and self-sustaining citizens.

Mr. President,

The Government is therefore tackling the human rights challenges from several fronts, with the upliftment of its people at the centre. Despite the fiscal challenges inherent in the devastating effects of floods and storms over the past 5 years as well as the worldwide economic crisis, the Government refuses to allow anything to slow its march towards doing the best that it can in the circumstances to ensure that all of its citizens enjoy their fundamental rights and freedoms; live in a fair and just society; and realise increased social and economic development.

Saint Vincent and the Grenadines is dedicated to advancing human rights, a position I believe is reflected in this statement. We are resolute in our commitment to appropriately consider human

rights with the care and seriousness it deserves, despite the challenges which restrain our ability but not our will or creativity. My delegation looks forward to your questions and recommendations during this interactive dialogue with the UPR Working Group.

Thank You!