Mr. President,

Excellencies, Distinguished Delegates, Members of the Troika

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I have the honour to have the opportunity to present my country's 4th Universal Periodic Review Report during this session of the UPR working Group. Our delegation to this Review includes representatives of the Prime Minister’s Office, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Justice and all participating from capital. Additionally, we are joined by the Permanent Representative and staff of our Permanent Mission to the Office of the United Nations in Geneva.

Vanuatu wishes to express gratitude to the states who made 135 recommendations during the 3rd UPR cycle. Of these recommendations, 96 was supported by the Government of Vanuatu and will be reported at this 4th cycle.

Mr. President,

I would like to take this opportunity to thank all the countries that have supported and rallied behind Vanuatu in its global fight against climate change. The efforts undertaken by the government of Vanuatu and all these partners in the Climate Diplomacy Program being undertaken at the International Court of Justice, underscores a significant advancement towards seeking resolution through legal channels.

The past four and a half years have posed significant challenges for the Vanuatu Government in fulfilling its human rights obligations. From navigating the complexities of the COVID-19 pandemic to enduring the devastating impact of four category 4-5 tropical cyclones between 2020 and 2023, our nation has faced immense trials. These events have not only displaced people but also strained resources and funding, redirecting our focus towards emergency response and recovery efforts.

Nevertheless, amidst these challenges we remain steadfast in our commitment to uphold our intrinsic values and the dignity of our state. Rooted in our cultural and traditional heritage, as well as Christian principles, these foundations have empowered us to overcome adversity time and again. It is with great pride that I report on the advancements made in the realm of human rights in Vanuatu, where our proud heritage shapes every decision made across all levels of government.

At the outset, I would like to acknowledge all the key stakeholders who worked on the national report. These includes members of the National Human Rights Committee which consist of relevant government sectors, civil society, non-government organisations, chief representatives, women and youth groups, groups representing people with special needs and government stakeholders who actively involved in the development of this country’s fourth UPR Report.

Vanuatu is committed to advancing human rights and dignity of our people through national initiatives that conform to the principals enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. While we acknowledge the challenges ahead, we are steadfast in our commitment to safeguard the rights of our citizens, uphold universal obligations, enhance the service delivery, strengthen our legal framework, and building resilience in our communities.

We are determined to achieving tangible progress in safeguarding the rights of all citizens, particularly vulnerable groups such as women and girls, children, and persons with disabilities. Through progressive legislative measures, policy reviews, and strategic national planning, we are implementing a results-oriented approach to drive positive change in our communities.

In light of these circumstances, before I make our main presentation for this review, I would like to take a moment to address Vanuatu’s significant political achievement that occurred between 2019 and 2024. Over the past four years, we are pleased to inform that are 8 legislative reforms and amendments were enacted, while in addition there are 10 policies and strategies developed to strengthened the human rights framework in the country.

*Mr. President,*

***On the issue Relating to rights of vulnerable groups***

***For Women***

In 2021 the Government of Vanuatu launched the National Gender Equality Policy (NGEP) of 2020-2030. This comprehensive policy outlines five strategic areas aimed at promoting gender equality. These areas include:

* + eliminating discrimination and violence against women and girls,
  + enhancing women’s economic empowerment and skills development,
  + advancing women’s leadership and political participation;
  + Strengthening the foundation for gender mainstreaming; and
  + fostering gender responsive and community-driven solutions to climate and disaster resilience.

Additionally, the Department of Women’s Affairs has recently established Committees Against Violence Against Women across all provinces. These committees serve as focal points for women, addressing the five strategic areas outlined in the NGEP.

In 2021, the government through the National Disaster Management Act launched its Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) within the health sector. These SOPs aim to eradicate practices that obstruct victims from receiving comprehensive health care and ensure accountability among the health officers for their actions.

In 2019, the government fully established and staffed the Family Protection Unit within the Vanuatu Police Force, dedicated to addressing domestic violence cases and prosecuting offenders. Additionally, the Family Protection Unit assist victims in preparing applications for protection orders.

The Family Protection Act introduced Authorised Persons who can issue Temporary Protection Orders for domestic violence victims. Initially piloted in Santo, this initiative has expanded to cover the entirety of Vanuatu since its success. In 2023, the program was institutionalized under the Department of Women’s Affairs, overseeing AP activities across all provinces.

In 2022, the government introduced further measures to combat domestic violence through the establishment of the Domestic Violence Action Plan. This plan equips courts with resources to support Magistrates in handling and prioritizing domestic violence cases, through functional SOPs. It also allows individuals to apply for protection orders on behalf of victims through various channels such as email, phone calls, or in-person visits to courts. Additionally, all application and court fees are waived to ensure accessibility for all.

Furthermore, it's important to address the issue of the concept of bride price which is sometimes misunderstood by people from other cultures. Traditionally, this practice involves the exchange of gifts between the families of both parties to strengthen the bonds of marriage. It's crucial to understand that this exchange is symbolic and aimed at laying a firm foundation for the union, rather than being defined as a payment.

***On the issue* *relating to Children***

Vanuatu has made significant strides in advancing children’s rights across various domains, particularly in addressing child protection issues within the formal justice system.

Some notable achievements include:

* Prohibition of corporal punishment, marking a crucial step towards ensuring the physical and emotional well-being of children.
* The establishment of a 24-hour help-line by Child Protection Desk in 2023, providing children with essential support and guidance in times of need. Additionally, the development of a ‘referral pathway’ facilitates step-by-step assistance for children on accessing protection services;
* The recruitment of twelve Provincial Child Desks Officers in all provinces to advise on and to support the protection of children’s rights at the local level.

Moreover, the Ministry of Justice and Community Services has recently developed new draft legislations to address child protection issues. These include the Child Protection Bill, the Adoption Bill, the Juvenile Justice Bill, and the Juvenile Justice Procedure Bill. These bills are listed to be tabled in Parliament in its last session of 2024.

In our effort to combat teenage marriage and its associated challenges, the Government is reviewing the Control of Marriage Act to raise the age from 18 years for males and 16 years for female. This crucial step aims to mitigate instances of abuse, and neglect resulting from underage unions. This provides safeguards for the well-being of children.

Furthermore, Vanuatu has witnessed a notable improvement in birth registration rates, reaching a minimum of 80% in recent years. This achievement is due to various initiatives, including integration of birth registration processes into school enrolment procedures and facilitating birth registrations at hospitals prior to discharge, as well as government office registrations. These efforts underscore the commitment to ensuring every child's right to legal identity and access to essential services.

**Mr. President,**

***On the issu*e *relating to Disability***

The Vanuatu Government is currently implementing the National Disability Inclusive Development Policy which encompasses principles of respect, shared responsibility, autonomy, equality of opportunity, non-discrimination, and embracing of Melanesian and religious values. In early 2024, the government launched the Medical Disability Database Registry for registration of all persons with disability across Vanuatu. This initiative ensures that health services are shaped to meet their needs and enables effective responses during disaster.

Additionally, this year saw the development of a Council of Ministers Paper aimed at initiating rounds of consultation for the Vanuatu Disability and Inclusion Act. This significant step underscores the government's commitment to advancing disability rights and inclusion.

Furthermore, the 2022 National Census included the Washington Group of Questions which accommodate for the first time, enabling the collection of statistics on Persons living with disabilities. This inclusion is a pivotal milestone in enhancing our understanding of disability demographics and needs.

The government of Vanuatu has undertaken concerted efforts to address issues in communities by ensuring that government services reach the most remote areas and identifies the most vulnerable populations. This endeavour has been facilitated through the establishment of provincial offices, which serve as essential hubs for outreach and support.

**Mr President, within the health sector:**

In 2021, the government of Vanuatu established the Mental Health Unit under the Ministry of Health, providing victims of domestic violence with essential medical support and psychological counselling to address associated effects. The main facility, located at the Port Vila central hospital, is staffed with mental health professionals offering a range of services including counselling, medical treatment and police referrals.

Additionally, the government of Vanuatu established the Reproductive, Maternal, Neonatal, Child, Adolescent Policy & Strategic Plan, aiming to enhance access to sexual and reproductive health services.

Cervical cancer ranks as the second most frequent cancer among women aged fifteen (15) and forty-four (44) in Vanuatu. Annually, 22 women are diagnosed with cervical cancer, with only 3 surviving. To combat this, the Ministry of Health has introduced the HPV vaccination for young girls aged 9 to 13 since 2022, aiming to eliminate cervical cancer. The government is committed to complete the hundred percent vaccine rollout by the end of 2024 in all provinces.

**Within the Education sector;**

In 2022 the government introduced the Family Life Education curriculum for in-school education, with ongoing consultations on “Out of School Family Life Education” in targeting grades 11–13, as a stand-alone subject.

Since 2021, the Government has subsidised school fees through grants to all schools from early childhood, primary and secondary education for both government and government – assisted schools. In 2023, the grant was expanded to cover tuition for both junior and senior secondary schools aiming to enable all children to have access to education.

The School of Education at the National University of Vanuatu commenced recruitment of in-service and pre-service teachers in 2024. At least 113 teachers are trained on inclusive education, and assigned to schools where children with special needs are identified. These teachers are supported by the qualified Provincial Inclusive Education Coordinators from the Provincial Education Offices.

**In terms of Data Management and Statistics**

The government established the Vanuatu Bureau of Statistics in 2021. It underscores the government's commitment to robust data collection and analysis. A core function of the Bureau is to undertake the collection, production, analysis and publication of official and other statistics of all our citizens. In 2020, a national census was conducted and covered crucial information on persons with disability, gender equality and social inclusion in productive sectors, socio-cultural aspects, environment aspects, and food security. The 2020 census revealed a total population of 300,019, with 151,597 men and 148,422 women, and 14% of the population consisting of persons living with disability.

The Vanuatu National Civil Registration and Vital Statistics Policy provides for all citizens to have birth certificates and issuance of National ID cards. Over 72 percent of ID Card owners are already actively using the ID Card as voter identification with the old Voter Card being phased out by end of 2022. The rapid uptake by Ni-Vanuatu of this national identity card is about 77 percent of the population.

**Mr. President,**

**In terms of Climate Change**

The government's recognition of climate change's profound impact on Vanuatu's development led to the establishment of a standalone Ministry of Climate Change, mandated to address climate change, natural disasters, and environmental issues.

The Disaster Risk Management Act established the National Disaster Management Office and activated clusters in response to disasters including the gender, children, housing, Water, Sanitation and Hygiene, disability, infrastructure and food. These clusters provide crucial assessments, response and recovery efforts.

The Vanuatu Climate Change and Disaster Risk Reduction Policy focuses on climate change response with particular attention to vulnerable groups such as women, children, and persons with disability. This policy mandates the establishment of disaster committees at the national, provincial and community levels, which includes women representatives.

**For Correctional Services**

Between 2020 and 2022, the government undertook the construction of new correctional facilities to tackle issues of overcrowding and improve sanitation standards. This included the establishment of a new Female Correctional facility, a Juvenile Centre, and another Correctional facility in the southern part of the country, all built to adhere to international standards, prioritizing the respect and dignity of detainees.

In 2023, following a report compiled on the issue of overcrowding, the government, through the Ministry of Justice, requested the intervention of the Head of State to address the issue of overcrowding by exercising his constitutional powers. The Ministry of Justice issued directives for total closure of the High-Risk centre allowing a transitionary period for relocation of inmates to ensure humane standards are met. Subsequently, recognizing the inadequate conditions of existing facilities, the government issued tenders for builders to construct a new transitional facility, enabling detainee’s transfer and allowing the demolition of outdated structures.

**In the area of Police and Security**

In its commitment to ensuring security to all its citizen, the government has increased police recruitments within the Vanuatu Police Force (VPF) since 2020 to 2024. These efforts aim to fill the 1,000 positions in the organizational structure, ensuring police presence across all six provinces. In addition, the VPF has introduced the Community Policing Concept, which has been piloted in Port Vila, to provide peace and security in Port Vila communities by ensuring community members are trained by the Vanuatu Police Force and working in specific communities as police representatives.

To address the police brutality, the government establishes the Professional Standards Unit to investigate all reported cases of police brutality and police misconducts. Police officers who commit unlawful acts are subject to criminal or disciplinary charges. Following a recent case of police brutality resulting in a citizen's death at the end of 2023, Vanuatu is pleased to report that implicated officers are now standing trial before the supreme court.

The Police Act is currently under review with the intention to accommodate the human rights components and establishing mechanisms to address police actions in a more accountable and transparent manner.

Mr President,

In conclusion, my government remains steadfast in its commitment to continuously enhance national mechanisms that bolster the fundamental pillars of human rights, thereby fostering social justice. We acknowledge the challenges inherent to small island developing states like Vanuatu and are dedicated to addressing them in tandem with our development endeavours. Recognizing the importance of collaboration, we are committed to strengthening both our international and regional partnerships.

My government is cognizant that our efforts for development must coincide with our abilities to mitigate the unique vulnerabilities as one of the countries with the highest frequency of natural disasters, which contribute to our financial vulnerabilities. We also recognised that our traditional values and practices are inherence to our development needs and aspirations.

We look forward to working closely with all our bilateral and multilateral partners to advance our collective aspiration as a nation.

I thank you, merci & tankiu tumas.