**Opening statement**

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Madame President, distinguished delegates,

I am honoured to open the Universal Periodic Review of Denmark.

The UPR has proven to be instrumental in promoting and strengthening human rights.

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Human rights stand as a fundamental pillar in Danish society. The Danish Government is firm in respecting all human rights obligations.

To advance and fully safeguard all human rights can be challenging – for any country.

And like all other countries we need to be held accountable, and this UPR is an opportunity to discuss and reflect on our own human rights record with peers. It is an opportunity for us to get new perspectives and inspiration.

In the same spirit, Denmark actively participates in the review of our fellow member states. And it is in this spirit that I stand here today with great anticipation to hear your recommendations to us.

We are aware that there are areas where we can improve or where we could do even better. And as it has been the case in previous UPR reviews, we look forward to consider and work with your recommendations.

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Personally, I am a firm believer in social democratic values. Human rights, the rule of law, equality and trust. These values guide my global compass and constitute the foundation of our government.

We believe in the international rule-based system, in fighting inequality and in equal rights for all.

I believe that universal human rights enable us to progress and improve the lives of our citizens.

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As most other countries, Denmark has been severely affected by COVID-19.

We have focused on protecting the public health, especially for the elderly and other vulnerable groups, and have introduced a number of measures. Some of these have impacted on human rights.

We have had to place a ban on public gathering in groups of a specific number of people. However, we do have continuously allowed political or opinion-shaping gatherings to take place throughout the pandemic.

We have had to temporarily close schools and non-essential stores. Access to certain venues has been restricted.

We have had to establish a requirement to wear facemasks in certain places, among others public transport and stores.

And we have introduced a new provision to the Danish Criminal Code for harsher penalties for COVID-19-related crime.

Some of these restrictions have been subject to debate and public demonstrations.

The measures, however, are based on law, necessary to protect the public health and temporary in nature. We continuously monitor the developments in the pandemic and adjust the regulation so that these criteria are met.

We have also introduced several relief packages for Danish businesses and workers. And we have seen this extensive economic support assisting businesses in reducing lay-offs.

Other support initiatives during the crisis have included supporting marginalized persons, including children, women who are victims of violence as well as persons with disabilities and homeless people.

All initiatives have been adopted by a broad political coalition consisting of parties on both sides of the Danish parliament.

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Allow me to begin with a few words on the migration and asylum policy as it is a current issue in both Danish and international media.

Irregular migration, refugees and displacement remain persistent challenges that will only increase in the future.

Denmark is pursuing a fair and realistic immigration policy without compromising our obligation to help people who need protection. All asylum seekers are offered accommodation, necessary social measures and necessary medical treatment, and asylum seeking children receive education.

However, the current international asylum system is not working. It leads to results that are unfair and unethical. It creates incentives for children, women and men to embark on dangerous journeys along migratory routes, while human traffickers earn fortunes. And it challenges the political stability, social cohesion as well as the security situation in both countries of origin, transit and destination.

That is why Denmark is promoting a more humane and fair asylum system, where irregular migration is replaced by legal pathways and resettlement of quota refugees.

It is our firm belief that we can help more people better, if we help in the regions of origin by addressing the root causes and by creating genuine alternatives to irregular migration.

A foreign national fleeing from persecution or torture will be granted protection. However, it is a fundamental principle in the Danish asylum system that protection is temporary.

The protection lasts as long as there is a threat. When the need for protection is no longer present, the foreign national should return home.

The Danish Refugee Appeals Board has recently in a number of cases declared that the general situation in Damascus as well as in Rif Damascus has improved. Consequently, a number of cases where protection was granted on the grounds of general circumstances in Damascus and Rif Damascus is now revisited.

If a foreign national cannot return home due to Denmark’s international obligations, the protection status will be prolonged.

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Madame Chairperson, at our second UPR in 2016, Denmark received 199 recommendations. We accepted 122 immediately and another 5 as a result of our voluntary mid-term review.

I would like to highlight some of the actions that the recommendations have generated.

Several countries pointed towards our outstanding ratification of the International Convention on the Protection of all Persons from Enforced disappearances.

I am therefore pleased to announce that within the coming months, the ratification instrument is expected to be forwarded to the depositary. The necessary national legal adjustments have been finalised allowing us to finally ratify the convention.

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I am also pleased to report that in 2018 the Danish Parliament passed an Act on Prohibition against Discrimination on Grounds of Disability.

The act prohibits direct and indirect discrimination as well as retaliation based on disability. It applies to all private and public activities within all areas of society outside the labour market.

In December 2020, an amendment to the act was passed, which provides reasonable accommodation in public and private schools and day cares.

The Danish Board of Equal Treatment now have the competence to consider complaints on not only discrimination but also on the lack of reasonable accommodation and award compensation.

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Violence against women is a key priority for Denmark, and a number of important legislative initiatives have been passed by Parliament in the past few year.

In 2017, the maximum penalty for violence in close relations was increased from three to six years imprisonment.

In 2019, a new provision on psychological violence in close relations was adopted, thereby criminalizing grossly degrading, abusive or offensive behavior fit for unduly controlling another person.

In March 2021, the Danish parliament adopted a bill to clarify the scope of the provision, underlining that negative social control can be considered psychological violence.

To raise awareness, the Government launched the campaign “Reach Out”. The campaign materials reflect the fact that the type and effects of psychological violence is different for women and men.

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Another major development in addressing violence against women has been an amendment of the legal definition of rape in our Criminal Code.

On 1 January 2021, a consent-based rape law entered into force. With the provision, the definition of rape has been changed. It is now based on a very basic principle: That sex without consent is rape.

The provision does not contain a definition of consent. Though consent must always be given voluntarily and be an expression of free will. A consent can be expressed verbally or indirectly according to the circumstances.

Along with the legislation, the government launched an awareness raising campaign, and the guidance material for the topic Health, Sexual and Family Education for primary and secondary schools will be updated.

In addition to the new provision, the Government also launched a number of new initiatives to prevent rape and provide better conditions for rape victims in the legal system. The new initiatives will include giving victims the right to legal counsel before reporting a rape to the police and better legal counsel after reporting.

Furthermore, the government launched a new 24 hour helpline for victims of rape.

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Denmark recognizes that LGBTI persons are vulnerable and that they are disproportionately affected by discrimination, harassment and violence.

In 2018, Denmark adopted its first national LGBTI action plan. The action plan included a review of a wide range of legislation.

As a result, last year, the Government launched 10 legislative proposals, which will improve the protection of the rights of LGBTI-persons.

They will explicitly prohibit discrimination based on sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression and sex characteristics both inside and outside the labor market – and grant the right to obtain remedy with the Board of Equal Treatment.

Furthermore, they will explicitly prohibit hate crimes and hate speech on the grounds of sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression and sex characteristics.

The proposals also abolish the reflection period of 6 months when applying for change of legal gender marker, and introduces legal gender recognition for minors.

The Government is expecting to present the proposals in Parliament in the fall of 2021.

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In the last UPR cycle, Denmark was recommended to amend relevant laws in order to ensure that all persons with disabilities could vote and stand for election.

According to the Danish Constitutional Act, a person who is deprived of his or her legal capacity cannot vote at national parliamentary elections.

In order to allow more people the right to vote within the scope of the Constitution, the Parliament amended the Guardianship Act in 2019, so that a person can be partially deprived of their legal capacity to act – and therefore be able to vote.

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Human rights are generally in a good state in Denmark. But as also reflected by your recommendations at the last UPR cycle, we can still improve. And we will always seek to do better.

Let me end with a few words on the preparation of our national report.

We have co-operated closely with the Danish Institute for Human Rights on organizing country-wide public hearings about the human rights situation in Denmark. The hearings were held at four Danish universities as well as in Greenland and the Faroe Islands.

Danish civil society and the public at large were also invited to comment on our national report. The comments from several NGOs as well as the large UPR-Coalition of civil society organisations lead to several amendments in our report.

The process was a testament of the engaged and well-functioning civil society in Denmark.

I wish to express my sincere thanks to all organisations and individuals who contributed to this process.

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Allow me now to give the floor to my distinguished colleagues, Ministers of Foreign Affairs of the Faroe Islands and of Greenland.

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Thank you to the Faroe Islands and Greenland for their opening remarks.

Madame President, distinguished delegates.

Without further ado, we look forward to the questions and recommendations and to a good discussion with you.

Due to other pressing obligations, I have asked Mr. Ulf Melgaard, who is Director for International Law and Human Rights in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, to lead the Danish delegation for the remaining part of the session.

Thank you Mdm. President.