**OPENING REMARKS BY THE HON FIAME NAOMI MATAAFA**

**PRIME MINSITER OF SAMOA**

**AT THE PRESENTATION OF SAMOA’S THIRD UPR TUESDAY 2ND NOVEMBER 2021: LAVA HOTEL APIA**

Talofa lava and Greetings from Samoa. I am honoured to address the Human Rights Council on this third cycle of reporting under the Universal Periodic Review mechanism.

Samoa is a small island developing state in the Pacific with a population of around 200,000 people. Our heritage traces back 3,000 years. Our vision is for all Samoans to live quality lives where our culture is protected, our Christian values are respected, our natural environment is secured from further deterioration, and more importantly our individual rights are upheld.

This is underpinned by our unique communal faa-Samoa culture and traditions. We take collective responsibility for each other, our ‘aiga or families,’ our villages and country.

Our core values of respect, dignity, love, protection, and service guide social interaction and mutually reinforce human rights. Thus, our culture, Christian values, and the rule of law, are vital to our efforts for the promotion and fulfilment of all human rights and fundamental freedoms in Samoa.

The Constitution of the Independent State of Samoa remains the supreme law of the land. It sets out the fundamental rights and freedoms recognized by Samoa. All persons are equal before the law. Samoa is blessed with a generally peaceful and safe society with an active media community. Parliamentary elections are considered open and fair. Order and security are supported by our fa’a-matai and traditional village systems that work closely with an unarmed police force. We continue to enhance a ‘human rights-based approach’ to sustainable development.

Our development and resolve as a nation continues to be tested under these difficult times. Climate change continues to pose an existential threat. The measles epidemic in 2019, claimed many young lives and was devastating for Samoa. The COVID19 border closures, has reversed hard fought development gains. BUT we remain COVID free!

More recently, the events that unfolded following our 2021 elections divided our country and tested all key pillars of our society. While these were difficult times for Samoa, it was a key milestone in our ongoing journey as a mature democracy. The rule of law was upheld through our democratic traditions and an independent judiciary. This allowed for a peaceful transition to the new government that I lead as the first female Prime minister. This is also testament to the resilience of our people, the strength of our institutions and communal thinking nurtured by our culture, as well as our Christian faith.

Since our first two reports in 2011 and 2016, we have continued to invest in improving our implementation efforts. Samoa establishing its National Mechanism for the Implementation, Reporting and Follow Up (NMIRF) Taskforce, ensured coordinated and continuous implementation. Data collection was improved and alignment to other reporting processes was made possible.

The strengthened meaningful stakeholder engagement received positive feedback. The dedicated interactive dialogues and follow up responses from government, given their centrality to a rights based approach on issues raised by the UN, NHRI and Non government stakeholders, was a successful feature of the current review.

Our report focuses on the Implementation of the 129 recommendations received in 2016. A matrix identifying key actions was created and shared. Even some of the hard issues that were noted, were discussed.

More than 90% of the recommendations were either fully or partially implemented integrating implementation to SDGs and national development plans.

Samoa’s Human Rights Framework has been strengthened progressively, through changes in legislation, improved institutions and policies as well as dedicated awareness raising and training.

We have currently ratified 6 of the 9 core human rights conventions and remain committed to ratifying all.

We maintain a standing open invitation to all United Nations Special Procedures mandate holders, with one visit awaiting borders to open. A plan to submit overdue reports is in place.

The protection of Samoans Civil and Political Rights; Economic, Social and Cultural Rights are evident through the multiple legislative and policy interventions.

But more work remain. There are no easy solutions to some of the ongoing challenges including on domestic and gender based violence, climate change and recovery from the health crises.

Investing in our people is the cornerstone of our development journey. Thus, we commit to a human rights based approach to implementing the SDGs.

* Education is compul­sory and fee-free for public schools with universal access to primary education.
* There is almost universal access to clean water, sanitation, roads and electricity.
* Our infrastructure is more climate resilient and inclusive.
* There is no extreme hunger and less mothers are dying at childbirth.
* People have better access to public health services and facilities, while there are more women than men in top management in the public sector.
* Villages are introducing bylaws to punish perpetrators of violence and more children with disabilities are enrolled in schools.
* Building resilience to disasters and climate change is fully integrated across all sectors and at the community level.
* The senior citizens pension has increased.

The new Government recently passed its first budget focusing on **"Recovery, building resilience and shared prosperity for all the people of Samoa”.**

* There is increased investment in social protection.
* Funds are committed to help enforce the community law centre act.
* The Social, Well Being and Education of our people remains a top priority.
* Strengthening Health Services is not negotiable.
* Population wide COVID19 vaccination coverage has been enforced with 95% accessing vaccination and around 70% of the eligible population fully vaccinated. The 12 -17 year old vaccination roll out has also begun.

Empowering our communities and stimulating business innovation and growth are key to post Covid 19 recovery. Broadening the use of technology can support the economic empowerment of women, youth and persons with disabilities. Building resilience to climate change is a matter of survival.

Efforts continue for more attention on addressing the needs of women, children, youth, elderly and persons with disabilities.

The Faafafine and faatama are unique in our Samoan society. The Samoa Faafafine Association (SFA) continues to work closely with Government in key sectors such as health and businesses. There is renewed and strengthened engagement with the Samoa Faafafine Association as they continue to become an important dialogue partner in the UPR process. In sharing their priorities with government, they call for an in depth understanding by the Human Rights Council of indigenous / cultural identities like Fa’afafine and Fa’atama but not just through the LGBTQI lenses. We continue to promote an open dialogue with SFA.

**Excellencies**

While there is progress, not all are benefitting equally and many challenges remain. This review process is one platform, the Samoan government uses to assess progress and identify gaps for dedicated attention. Therefore the new and emerging issues identified in our report will be key for the next 4 to 5 years.

Our government will continue to ensure strong and decisive leadership and strengthen a whole of society approach. Despite the mounting challenges, Samoa is committed to ensuring that we face them, while still promoting the respect, protection and fulfilment of all human rights and fundamental freedoms in Samoa.

**We look forward to a successful review**