

**The Delegation of Saint Vincent and the Grenadines**

**to the 39th Session of the Working Group for the Universal Periodic Review**

**Statement**

by

**Senator the Honourable Keisal M. Peters**

Minister of State with responsibility for Foreign Affairs and Foreign Trade

**“Opening Statement on behalf of Saint Vincent and the Grenadines at the 39th Session of the Working Group for the Universal Periodic Review”**

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Madam President, Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Saint Vincent and the Grenadines is pleased to, once again, participate in the Universal Periodic Review, in its third cycle, and welcomes this opportunity to present our national report and update on the progress made by the State in the implementation of its human rights agenda, with particular focus on the recommendations accepted by the State within the UPR framework.

Joining me today for the dialogue with the working group session are Mr. Kezron Walters, Crown Counsel 2 in the Ministry of Legal Affairs and Mr. Westford Joseph, Senior Foreign Service Officer and the coordinator of the National Human Rights Monitoring and Reporting Mechanism in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

The implementation, in whole or in part, of over 90% of Saint Vincent and the Grenadines’ accepted recommendations is proof of our commitment to the UPR process, and promotion and protection of human rights at the national level.

Subsequent to our participation in the UPR in its second cycle, all accepted recommendations were shared together with the implementation matrix with the relevant government agencies and other stakeholders to begin implementation. Saint Vincent and the Grenadines now has a functioning inter-agency mechanism: the National Human Rights Monitoring and Reporting Mechanism, which coordinates implementation, monitoring and reporting of accepted recommendations from UPR and Treaty Bodies. Th National Human Rights Monitoring and Reporting Mechanism also reaches out to various stakeholders, including civil society, regional and international partners, and agencies to advance the national human rights agenda.

Over the period, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines has made great strides in improving its human rights related legislation in line with international standards, including the Domestic Violence Act (2015), Child Justice Act (2019), Cybercrime Act (2016) and the Consumer Protection Act (2020).

Additionally, I am pleased to inform that sexual offenses laws and employment laws are currently under legislative review, with a view to addressing issues highlighted in some of the advance questions submitted by States. This includes revising the minimum age of marriage as 18 years and laws addressing sexual harassment in the workplace, sexual assault, and rape to provide more support and redress to victims and survivors, while ensuring that perpetrators face justice. These legislative reviews are currently underway and have taken issues and recommendations for a multiplicity of stakeholders into consideration, including those received from the relevant Treaty Bodies.

We recognize the importance of periodic reporting and subsequent dialogues with the relevant Treaty Bodies of the core UN human rights treaties we have ratified. Our country has made significant headway in our obligations to fulfill, promote and protect human rights on the ground which has not enjoyed much visibility because of our limited reporting. To correct this, a roadmap has been developed by the National Mechanism for Reporting and Follow-up to systematically clear the backlog of reports within the next 5 to 8 years, beginning with updating our Common Core Document which we intend to begin next year.

Madam President

The Royal Saint Vincent and the Grenadines Police Force has taken steps to further curtail instances of police abuse and misconduct and ensure that the Force is an agent for the promotion and protection of human rights. These efforts include yearly training of police officers on the UN Use of Force and Firearm Policy for Law Enforcement as well as greater public awareness and outreach campaigns by the Police Public Relations and Complaints Office to educate the public and victims on the process to report and seek redress. Saint Vincent and the Grenadines will have a discussion on creating an independent body to investigate complaints against law enforcement officials.

In an effort to reduce the backlog of cases before the courts, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines has bolstered the staff in the Criminal Judicial system. An additional high court judge was assigned, and several prosecutorial staff as well as summary prosecutors assigned to the police force were appointed. Sentencing guidelines, sentencing induction hearings and mediation training were introduced or updated in an effort to reduce the processing of cases by the court. All these steps have shown promising signs of reducing the backlog but have been discounted due to disruptions caused by COVID-19.

Saint Vincent and the Grenadines has always placed emphasis on economic, social, and cultural rights, as these rights are instrumental for individuals to live a life of dignity. As such, significant efforts were placed into projects, programmes and initiatives geared towards ensuring persons’ right to food, work, housing, health, education, and more are met as much as possible.

Social assistance programmes continue to provide support, in cash and in-kind, to indigent persons, while also implementing empowerment programmes and training to lift persons out of a state of dependence on public assistance. Avenues are also provided for indigent persons to obtain financial assistance to acquire medication, housing, building materials, assistance with utility bill payments and school supplies on a case-by-case basis. Housing programmes continue to provide no-cost to low-cost housing to persons with disabilities, the indigent and low to middle income earners.

The number of undernourished persons in the State continues to decline and programmes exist for the distribution of food baskets to needy families, and for meals to be obtained by children in school. The Government continues its programmes to promote food security and nutrition, through promoting farming and targeted interventions to reduce dependence on food import. Programmes on farming technologies, farm management and agro-processing were introduced in schools, and through the Farmers Support Company, farmers and fisher folks can access a number of benefits to reduce input costs.

My country has placed emphasis on the diversification of the economy to ensure sustainable growth and job creation. Growths in the construction, hospitality, manufacturing, agriculture, and fisheries sectors have shown positive signs due to various activities being undertaken. Programmes to spur job creation, build skills among the unemployed, encourage entrepreneurship, facilitate internships, and access overseas job markets were also undertaken and thousands of Vincentians continue to benefit from these programmes each year.

Under education, the government has increased the number of free preschool centers, attracted several universities, increased the number of bursaries and scholarships and continues to provide subsidized student loans, and financial remedial help and in-kind support to needy students to ensure that no child is left behind. Several certified Technical and Vocational training opportunities were also made available. Steps were taken to build ICT capabilities of students through free or low-cost internet schemes and free tablets distribution, to prepare them for an increasingly ICT reliant world.

The Government of Saint Vincent and the Grenadines also continues to work on improving systems of justice that protect the rights of children. In doing so, the Child Justice Act of 2019 removed the use of corporal punishment as a sentence in the courts and contains provisions to help curtail the use of corporal punishment nationally, such as strengthening avenues to prosecute persons who physically abuse children under the guise of corporal punishment and sanction parents who abuse children through the laws relating to assault and battery.

If a child faces unsafe conditions or is a victim of abuse and is in need of care and protection, under the Children (Care and Adoption) Act, the child can access protection through the Family Services and the Child Development Unit.

 The Anti-Trafficking in Persons Unit within the police force conducts intensive surveillance and investigations, training of first contact officers and individuals, and public awareness campaigns to identify and prevent cases of human trafficking. We continue to observe low instances of such cases within Saint Vincent and the Grenadines’ border with just over 40 investigations being launched, and charges laid in one instance. The Anti-Trafficking Unit therefore has prioritized prevention as we maintain vigilance and public education on the matter. Programmes administered by the Gender Affairs Department, the Child Protection Unit and the Sexual Offenses Unit continue to counter sexual exploitation of women and children, and multiple facilities are in place for their protection and care, including counseling and financial support as needed.

Through its partnership with UNICEF and the OECS/USAID on the Juvenile Justice Reform Project, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines was able to make substantial progress in Juvenile Justice Reform, including the transformation of the Liberty Lodge Boys Training Centre, in 2018, to include a wing to house male juveniles in conflict with the law. Additionally, there was the adoption of a legacy model and framework to guide the use of diversion, rehabilitation, and reintegration. The residents housed at the Centre are currently engaged in a variety of technical and vocation programmes, counseling and self development programmes as part of the rehabilitation process.

Saint Vincent and the Grenadines recognizes that in the area of juvenile justice, more still needs to be done to accommodate girls who find themselves in conflict with the law, and with the help of the international community and funding, we will be able to expedite this process over the coming years.

Saint Vincent and the Grenadines works tirelessly to promote policies, programmes and other interventions that enhance gender equality, mutual respect and harmony between men and women in the Vincentian society.

In 2020, the Government of Saint Vincent and the Grenadines expanded the scope of the Gender Equality Commission, formally the National Commission on Gender-Based Violence, to serve as an oversight body that monitors issues of gender mainstreaming and developing policies by creating a platform between key stakeholders and taking solid steps towards gender equality nationally. This commission is multi-sectoral comprising of the Health, Education, Social Development, National Security, Legislative Ministries as well as Community Based Organizations and Non-Governmental Organizations.

Saint Vincent and the Grenadines has several ongoing programmes with multisectorial involvement for the engagement of boys, girls, men and women as strategic allies in achieving gender equality and combatting gender-based violence. This includes:

* The Teen Mothers programme, which offers parenting and other support systems to teenaged mothers, including avenues for their re-entry into secondary schools;
* The Single Parents Empowerment Programme;
* The Positive Reinforcement Programme for those persons who can be rehabilitated, which is designed to help perpetrators unlearn violent behaviours and replace them with non-violent alternatives, while addressing underlying attitudes as part of reducing recidivism;
* The Men as Partners programme, which is an eight-week training programme targeting men in communities with high instances of gender-based violence with education and sensitization campaigns;
* The Anti-violence Campaign in Communities and educational institutions;
* The Victims of Domestic Violence Support Groups; and
* The Parenting Support Programme.

Additionally, a Gender-Based Violence (GBV) Referral Pathway was developed to link survivors of gender-based violence with support and competent service providers, ensuring that they can safely access and receive psychosocial support and protection. Training was also carried out to build capacity of hotline advocates and service providers to recognize the signs of violence and individuals at risk, increase public awareness on Gender-Based Violence, and how to safely access support services. Assistance was also given for the procurement of tools and equipment that they will need.

In SVG there are three safe houses used to house victims and survivors of Gender-Based Violence. Victims spend a minimum of two (2) days in the safe house, after which they are then moved to more permanent housing that is far from the perpetrator. Where needed, financial assistance in the form of rent, utility payments and a monthly stipend can be accessed as part of the Government’s Victim Support Programme.

Madam President

During the reporting period, as we combatted the crippling impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, weathered the cycles of explosive eruptions of the La Soufrière volcano on the island of Saint Vincent, and defended against the rampage of increasingly intense adverse weather events due to climate change, we never forgot that at the core of our response must be the needs, and rights of our people. Because of the extraordinary and unique admixture of these challenge, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines in Annex 1 of the report, highlighted the Government’s response to ensure that the human rights of individuals were addressed.

As such, as a first step to combatting COVID-19, immediate steps were taken to bolster the healthcare system, train frontline workers and enact or make the necessary legislative amendments to better manage the spread and impact of COVID-19 on the population.

The National Insurance Act was amended to provide for unemployment benefits for persons laid off due to the pandemic. The Public Health (COVID-19) Rules placed restrictions on public gatherings, indoor dining, and made mandatory the wearing of masks in public service vehicles and public places.  The Emergency Authorisation of Vaccine Rules provided for the use of the six (6) noted vaccines for the treatment and prevention of the disease.

In the Recovery & Stimulus Package passed by the government to mitigate the fallout from the pandemic, measures were taken to protect the health and preserve the lives of citizens, strengthen the social safety net to protect the vulnerable, and to minimize economic decline as much as possible through fostering entrepreneurship and job creation, and providing supplemental displacement income to workers in the most affected industries.

Recognizing that the pandemic has put vulnerable people including women and children at a higher risk of domestic abuse and exploitation, new programs were developed, or existing ones expanded to prevent these issues and provide help when needed. Children, largely due to online schooling, were able to continue their education, and steps were taken to further sensitize the public to the increased risk of child abuse and exploitation during these periods.

The explosive phase of the La Soufrière volcano that began on April 9, 2021 was equally destructive to the socioeconomic situation in the country, displacing 21% of the population of the country, and causing widespread damage and loss in a variety of industries, including agriculture, tourism, utilities, infrastructure, and the social sector, to the tune of around $634 million eastern Caribbean dollars, or 233 million US dollars.

Although the explosive phase seems to have ended, and the alert level has been set to yellow, allowing persons to return home, the country is still putting the pieces back together which involves relocating whole communities into safer areas, ash and debris clean up, restoring our forest and infrastructures and most importantly providing support to those affected, with priority given to the most vulnerable.

These reconstruction efforts have been further impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic and adverse weather, particularly Hurricane Elsa which caused further damage to the country on April 29, 2021.

We know from our data that women suffered a disproportionate loss of income relative to their male counterparts as a result of the volcanic eruption, except in Agriculture, Forestry, and Fishing. To mitigate this issue, employment programmes have been expanded in the regions most affected by the volcanic eruptions, with special emphasis being placed on women’s employment, including the pilot “Women in Agriculture Programme”, which has identified 50 women to support in earning an income through agriculture.

The Soufriere Relief Grant Programme will continue to provide cash transfer support to displaced families until December 2021. The Psychosocial Family Life Education Programme focuses on coping skills, development, parenting education, and awareness-building for over 500 displaced families, employment programs for the clean-up process, targeting persons whose livelihood were impacted by the eruption. The re-settling program is ongoing, which involves building homes for those individuals whose houses were destroyed and who resided in areas that have been declared unsuitable for re-occupation.

It will be remiss of me not to mentioned the prompt response and assistance lent to Saint Vincent and the Grenadines by various international organisations, states and even private individuals during the emergencies mentioned. The solidarity expressed by numerous people around the world to the people of Saint Vincent and the Grenadines have been overwhelming.

Saint Vincent and the Grenadines wishes to also acknowledge all partners who have assisted in the numerous projects, programmes, and initiatives mentioned in our national report. We acknowledge also the hugely helpful assistance received from the Office of the High Commission on Human Rights and the Commonwealth Secretariat in the preparation of our national report.

I pause here Mr. President to allow member states to ask any questions based on our national report and further clarifications provided in my statement. I look forward to this discourse, and the subsequent recommendations as these interactions are the essence of the review process.

Thank you Madam President.

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