**Fourth Universal Periodic Review of Finland at the**

**UN Human Rights Council**

Opening statement by the Head of Delegation of Finland

**Mr. Pekka Haavisto, Minister for Foreign Affairs**

9.11.2022

Mr. Vice-President, Distinguished Delegates,

I am honoured to have this important dialogue on Finland’s human rights situation with you. We appreciate this opportunity to discuss human rights, rule of law and democracy in a **fruitful and forward-looking way**. We welcome that our fourth UPR-review **coincides with our current Human Rights Council membership**. As a member, Finland recognizes a special obligation to **uphold the highest standards** in the promotion and protection of human rights.

The UPR is an important tool in securing that all States’ human rights commitments are implemented and put into concrete action. Our experiences from previous reviews are nothing but positive. The recommendations received in the past three UPR reviews have been **valuable in our efforts to build a better and more just society** for all persons living in Finland.

In preparing for this review, my Government has **cooperated** closely with the Finnish **civil society** at large. In our delegation, we are also pleased to have - as observers - **independent representatives** from the Finnish Parliament, the Human Rights Delegation that is a part of our National Human Rights Institution and the Advisory Board on the International Human Rights Affairs.

Chair,

Defending human rights, gender equality and non-discrimination form the very basis of any democratic society. Finland underscores the importance of the **rules-based international system**, its obligations, and the universality, indivisibility, interdependence and binding nature of human rights. Every person has the right to full enjoyment of all human rights without discrimination.

These rights and principles remain **cornerstones of our society** and are as **timely** as ever.

We must together **continue our joint efforts** in protecting human rights and democratic norms also - and particularly so - in times of conflicts, pandemics and other crisis situations. During past years, the **COVID-19 pandemic** has had serious and far-reaching repercussions on the enjoyment of human rights in all corners of this planet. In many regions, the pandemic is still an on-going challenge.

The **current situation in Europe and globally** is only underlining the fundamental importance of safeguarding human rights of each and everyone, regardless of their background. The horrors and brutalities witnessed in Ukraine the past year have also made more visible the relationship and interlinkages between international human rights law and international humanitarian law.

**Crimes against humanity, war crimes and grave human rights violations** should and must never be tolerated. More needs to be done to bring perpetrators to justice. We will continue our work to fight against impunity for the most serious international crimes, including crimes against humanity and war crimes.

During the past years, the interdependence between human rights and the **environment** has also become evident. Environmental urgency and climate crisis have severe human rights impacts on millions of people all over the world. Finland continues actively to engage on the interlinkages between human rights and the environment, biodiversity and climate change.

Chair,

No country is perfect on human rights. According to independent monitoring reports, the overall human rights situation in general is fairly good in Finland, However, we also have **human rights challenges that need urgent attention**. Many of those challenges are under discussion here today. I would like to thank delegations for their **advance questions and comments**. I will be **addressing many of those in this opening statement**.

I will also give an **overview of the most recent steps** taken in the field of human rights in my country. In our national **UPR Report**, you will find detailed information on many of these questions. In some areas, important steps forward have been taken in the recent months, after the provision of our fourth UPR report.

Chair,

Fundamental and human rights as well as legal protection form the very basis of Prime Minister Sanna Marin’s **Government Programme**. According to the Programme, Finland’s foreign and security policy as well as development policy are human-rights-based. This was reaffirmed in the **Government’s Human Rights Report** given to Parliament in the end of last year.

Finland’s long-time priority remains the advancement of the rights of **women and girls**, in all their diversity, as well as **gender equality** in all fields of life. The Government is placing particular attention to defending the rights of those in the **most vulnerable positions**. These include, among others, persons with disabilities, indigenous peoples and persons belonging to various minorities, including the Roma.

The significance of **civil society** in monitoring and promoting the implementation of human rights has increased. The activities of human rights defenders have positive effects on fundamental and human rights development locally, nationally, regionally and globally. Finland places special emphasis on supporting civil society and human rights defenders all over the world. The Ministry for Foreign Affairs has this year updated our **national guidelines on human rights defenders**.

Chair,

The third **National Action Plan on Fundamental and Human Rights**, covering the period 2020 to 2023, was adopted in June 2021. During the preparation of the Action Plan, Government cooperated broadly with stakeholders including the National Human Rights Institution and NGOs. Special consideration was given to the **recommendations** issued to Finland by the various **Treaty Bodies**.

The Action Plan focuses on developing **human rights monitoring** at the national level. National fundamental and human rights **indicators** have been developed as a key part of the National Action Plan. They provide a new tool for monitoring fundamental and human rights in the short and long term.

**Human rights treaties** are crucial tools for holding governments accountable for the realization of the rights inherent to all of us. I am pleased to inform you that the Government has submitted a **proposal to Parliament to ratify the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance**. The Government proposes an amendment to the Criminal Code to criminalize the enforced disappearance as a new offence. Since our previous UPR review, **three Council of Europe’s human rights treaties have entered into force for Finland** as they entered into force internationally.

Chair,

Let me now turn to the **advance questions** addressed to Finland in preparation of this review. As time is limited and I want to leave room for dialogue, I will address the themes that were the most prominent in the questions received.

We received several questions about our actions on **combatting and preventing violence against women.** This is understandable as violence against women is indeedone of the most persistent human rights problems in the Finnish society.The Government has implemented **several actions** during the past years. Just to mention one concrete example: for the year 2021, a total of 25 million euros have been allocated to 29 **shelters**. The shelters are open for anyone who have experienced or have been threatened by domestic violence. The Government has also appointed a **Special Rapporteur** on violence against women. But it is clear, that we need to step up action to combat violence against women, domestic as well as sexual and gender-based violence in Finland.

We also received several well-founded questions about the **rights of the Sami**. Finland consistently and actively promotes the **rights of indigenous peoples**, including their right to participate in decision-making concerning themselves. My Government is in **regular dialogue** with the Sami Parliament in matters affecting their rights. While there is room for improvement, Finland is fully committed to respecting and promoting the linguistic and cultural rights of all Sami persons, in line with international obligations. An important step was taken when a **Truth and Reconciliation Commission** was established, in full cooperation with the Sami. Concerning the **reform on the** **Act on Sami Parliament, no final result** has so far been achieved, but the negotiations are ongoing as we speak.

The Government is also strongly committed in the **fight against racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance,** both online and offline. This commitment is reflected in the **Government’s Action Programme** to Combat Racism and to Promote Good Relations, adopted in October 2021. For example, the Action Plan commits to providing **training** for the police on the prohibition of ethnic profiling. The training on hate crimes and ethnic profiling is mandatory for all police officers and civil servants of police departments.

Finland's current legislation and the National Roma Policy from 2018 to 2022 provide a foundation for the promotion of the **equality of the Roma**. A new Roma Policy for the years 2023 to 2030 is under preparation.

Regarding **refugees and migrants**, Finland stays committed to respecting the principle of **non-refoulement** and to providing international protection for those in need. The legal protection of asylum seekers has been strengthened by **legislative amendments in 2021**. In addition, the national asylum process has recently been **evaluated.** Government has also submitted to Parliament a proposal aiming to simplify the **family reunification process**.

In addition, the Government has coordinated particular measures to support the tens of thousands of **Ukrainians** in Finland that are in need of international protection after Russia’s war of aggression against Ukraine.

The Government is fully aware of the need to continue the work for addressing the discrimination against **persons with disabilities** in all fields. The second **national action plan** for the years 2020 to 2023 was published in February 2021. For example, there is an urgent need to find new solutions to fight barriers and increase participation of persons with disabilities in the **labor market**. Additionally, the legislation on **disability services** is currently being reformed.

The Government is also aware of the need to ensure that the **rights of older persons** are fully protected in all circumstances. A **new Ombudsman** for older persons took office in 2022. The duty of the Ombudsman is to promote and assess the realisation of the fundamental and human rights of older people in relevant legislation and decision-making processes.

I would also like to refer to the question on the **rights of the transgender people.** It is a fact that many LGBTIQ persons living in Finland face discrimination in their everyday lives. The Government is strongly committed to protecting the **rights of sexual and gender minorities.** An important step further was taken this fall when the Government’sproposal for an *Act on the legal recognition of gender that respects people’s right to self-determination* (or the so-called **Trans Act**) was given to Parliament.

We also got several questions on the issue of **protecting freedom of religion in the legislation concerning animal welfare**. The proposal for a new animal welfare act is currently at Parliament. The proposed new provision concerning religious slaughter will be further discussed by Parliament, including its Constitutional Law Committee. We will also continue our discussions about this question with the religious communities in Finland. We take their concerns very seriously.

Lastly, I would like to comment the important question on the **follow-up of UPR recommendations in Finland**. The Ministry for Foreign Affairs serves as a focal point for both UPR and Treaty Body recommendations. Furthermore, the Government Network for Fundamental and Human Rights reviews all recommendations addressed to Finland and follows up their implementation.

Madam/Mr. Chair, distinguished delegates

Human rights belong to all. We should not and must not allow any person or group to be left behind. In order to achieve this goal, all governments **including my own**, need to step up their work for universal human rights.

I look forward to receiving your further comments and recommendations today.

This concludes my opening statement. My delegation stands now ready for the inter-active dialogue.

Thank you.