

Speech, Brian J. Williams, United Nations Resident Coordinator

ANNUAL CONFERENCE OF THE PEOPLE'S ADVOCATE

70- Years United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights- 20 Years Constitutional Rights, How has the Human Rights Agenda advanced in Albania?

11 December 2018

Dear Ms. Erinda Ballanca, People's Advocate,

Honorable Ms. Hysi, Deputy Speaker

Honorable Ms. Mesi, Deputy Prime Minister

Excellencies Ambassadors, Partners and friends,

Today – on this very special occasion, to celebrate not only International Human Rights Day but the 70th Anniversary of the signing of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in the city of Paris, as well as the 20th anniversary of the Albanian Constitution – it will nevertheless not surprise you that I want to talk about the Sustainable Development Goals, and in particular, SDG16 to promote Just, Peaceful and Inclusive societies.

The inclusion of SDG16 in Agenda2030 means much more than just one more goal. It is, rather, an unequivocal vote by all the nations of the planet that development is simply not possible unless it is built on a foundation of human rights. Respecting human rights is not a separate endeavor; and it's not optional.

The first word in Goal 16 is the word "just" standing for justice – and as Albania has made so abundantly clear with its focus on judicial reform – good governance is dependent upon having an incorruptible judiciary. The first concrete results of the vetting, the dismissal and resignation of judges and prosecutors, are noteworthy. And during these days we are witnessing important milestones, being the establishment of the new judicial institutions in Albania. These are critical steps that must be achieved for the reform to be successful.

Goal 16 is of course broken down into different targets. Amongst the targets are 1) the development of "effective, accountable and transparent institutions at all levels" and 2) "equal access to justice for all."

Ladies and gentlemen, these targets will not be met in Albania without having a range of functioning institutions that protect human rights. This includes of course a full parliament that fosters vigorous and evidence-based debate across the political spectrum. And, as mentioned, it obviously includes an independent justice system.

But it must also include well-resourced – with funding and staff – independent human rights institutions, including the People's Advocate, the Anti-Discrimination Commissioner, and INSTAT, amongst many others. Concerning the latter, INSTAT, we should not underestimate the value of having independent statistical data on a range of issues including demography, poverty, access to services, gender-equality and so on, even if the data is not so comfortable for the Government.

The establishment of a mechanism by parliament to interact more systematically with Albania's independent institutions is a new and important step forward. At the same time, we should not lose sight of the ultimate goal, which is a legislative or governmental response to the recommendations made by the Ombudsman. It means that if the Ombudsman sends a report with recommendations about how expropriations are done, that the next time it happens, it should be done better.

Albania should be proud to have a Paris "grade A" human rights institution, and the United Nations is privileged to work with the Ombudsperson across many of our programmes with UNDP, UNFPA, UNHCR, UNICEF, UN Women and others. We are collectively supporting the prioritized implementation of the Ombudsperson's 5-year strategy. We believe more institutional support is warranted for the office of the People's Advocate, and seek to expand our partnership.

Achieving the target of "equal access to justice", however, requires even more than judicial reform, an accountable parliament and independent human rights institutions. It also requires a vibrant civil society which works in tandem with the Government. For example civil society organizations that work with Roma or disabled communities to accompany them when they articulate demand for equal access to services. Or NGOs that run legal aid clinics to make sure that women have access to the full power of the law. Or NGOs that are specialized in juvenile justice, child protection, defending victims of trafficking, or providing assistance to migrants. Or organizations that are willing to take courageous stands on issues such as lesbian and gay rights.

The United Nations in Albania is proud to work with NGOs in all of these categories, along with the related Governmental institutions. For example, as part of our Free and Equal campaign for LGBTI rights, we are working with NGOs on a specific activity entitled "I'm your child", which highlights the role of parents and family support.

In many areas, important progress has been made. The number of Roma kids in pre-school has tripled over the last five years. Legislation passed earlier this autumn puts the burden on the state to make sure kids are registered at birth, even if the parents do not manage to do so. Rates of juvenile detention are dropping. Centres to receive migrants and asylum seekers have been expanded. Nearly two-thirds of Albania's municipalities now have Coordinated Community Response mechanisms to prevent and respond to violence against women, and the number is growing. And while violence against women – in and out of marriage – remains too high, we are seeing signs that women feel safer to speak up. Women are more engaged in political life, in Government, in parliament, in municipal councils – and maybe next June, we'll see more women mayors too.

Ladies and gentlemen, there are many targets – all within SDG #16 – which are pertinent to Albania, such as ensuring participation in decision-making, reducing corruption and bribery, preventing trafficking, reducing arms flows and combating organized crime.

But the last target within SDG16 that I would like to say a few sentences on is the one that requires "ensuring fundamental freedoms." One fundamental freedom is free speech. Concerning the media, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the right to freedom of expression has been in touch with my office, as he is monitoring how legislation concerning defamation may evolve. He is concerned that it is done in a way that protects free speech. He seeks to work closely with the OSCE in this regard.

And of course another kind of free speech is the right to protest peacefully, such as we have seen with students in recent days. Protests must be peaceful, and respectful of citizens, businesses and the law. The objective is dialogue, with any changes to be implemented through Albania's democratic institutions. Nevertheless, the UN finds itself in alignment with some of the requests, such as an increase in investment in education.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It has been 70 years since the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was signed in Paris. There is no question that the movement that was started then, perhaps dismissed by some as being idealistic and unrealistic, has proven such skepticism wrong. Instead the human rights movement has consistently gained ground across the world, across all cultures. And now it's enshrined in the world's first-ever global set of goals, Agenda2030. For those of seeking social justice, Agenda2030 is a gift. It is a gift because

it is a challenge that the world's governments have laid out for us. It is our job, in partnership with you, to be relentless in pursuit of that goal.

Thank you.