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WELCOMING REMARKS

HUMAN RIGHTS DAY 2017

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FOR MALAYSIA, SINGAPORE & BRUNEI

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KUALA LUMPUR

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Yang Berhormat Senator Datuk Paul Low, Minister in Prime Minister's Department in Charge of Governance, Integrity and Human Rights,

Yang Mulia Ambassador Raja Nushirwan Zainal Abidin, Deputy Secretary General, Bilateral Affairs, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, who is representing the Secretary-General

Yang Berbahagia Tan Sri Ahmad Zaki Ansore, Director General of the Implementation Coordination Unit, Prime Minister's Department

Yang Berbahagia Tan Sri Razali Ismail, Chairman of SUHAKAM,

Excellencies,

Distinguished guests,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Good morning and a warm welcome to the commemoration of Human Rights Day 2017. The United Nations Country Team is happy to host this event today in partnership with Government, SUHAKAM, PROHAM, the Malaysia CSO-SDG Alliance, ASLI, the Malaysian Bar, and Pusat KOMAS – with a focus on “Mainstreaming Human Rights, Moderation and Inclusiveness for Unity, Peace and Harmony”.

I also take this opportunity to thank the Honourable Minister Senator Datuk Paul Low, the moderators and speakers, and all of you, who have taken time off from your busy schedules to be here and to share with us your views on this topic – toward arriving at constructive recommendations and solutions.

Half a year after taking up office in Malaysia, what has been most striking for me is the unique social capital that you have, the interactions and harmony enjoyed between the many different cultures, ethnicities and religions. It is special. It is what makes Malaysia what it is and it is the reason why we have made “unity, peace and harmony” the objective of our Human Rights Day forum today. We hope the space provided today, will be useful in exploring how best we can continue to fulfil this objective - through human rights, moderation and inclusiveness.

I congratulate Malaysia on the adoption of the Resolution on Moderation by the UN General Assembly just three days ago. It reinforces the Langkawi Declaration adopted by ASEAN in 2015 that highlights the clear connection between “human rights and fundamental freedoms, equitable and inclusive growth, tolerance and mutual respect, and adherence to social justice to countering terrorism, violent extremism and radicalism”.

This is precisely what our Forum today is about.

Together with our partners, the UN Country Team hopes that this will be the beginning of greater engagement with various communities, experts and stakeholders, on how, the best of Malaysia, can be enhanced and preserved for generations to come - in line with the Charter of the United Nations, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (or UDHR) and the boldest global plan of our times, the Agenda 2030 and the Sustainable Development Goals or SDGs.

UN Charter and the UDHR

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Our common aspiration for peace and unity is why the United Nations was formed 72 years ago - “to save future generations from the scourge of conflict and war” and to do that by reaffirming “faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person, in the equal rights of men and women...”. And three years later, on the 10th of December 1948, world leaders, decided to articulate what these key principles of the UN Charter meant through the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

I would like to draw your attention on a very important aspect of the Universal Declaration – the link of **“human dignity and equal rights” to peace and stability.**

It is important to remember that the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was drafted in the immediate aftermath of cataclysm, of 50 million deaths in the second world war. And it was drafted under the impression that the war was started by an authoritarian regime that divided the world into “superior” and “inferior” races.

It was this as a backdrop that made the drafters of the UDHR draw the link between “equal rights” and peace and security. Some of the most respected personalities from different legal backgrounds, cultures and faiths came together, to find common denominators - common values to bind the human family together. And the outcome, was the UDHR, also known as the international *magna carta* - a compilation of values common to every member of the human family.

These values are as universally valid today as they were 70 years ago. Today, growing intra and inter-religious and inter-ethnic conflicts, have displaced over 60 million people. Just recently 600,000 people were exiled from the Rakhine state of Myanmar, with untold atrocities against children, women and men. We therefore, need to take heed - to view seriously the emerging signs of not only religious or ethnic polarisation but also issues of inequalities and injustices, and find ways to address them before they have a chance to proliferate beyond our control.

Since this year marks the beginning of a year-long campaign leading up to the 70th anniversary of the UDHR, please allow me to quickly mention key articles of the UDHR – that I feel are relevant to the topic of our discourse for today:

Preamble: That the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world lies in the inherent dignity and the equal rights of all.

Article 2: To avoid discrimination in all its forms. That the entitlement of rights and freedoms are for everyone without distinction of any kind.

It is interesting to note that in a recent Children4Change survey organized in the lead up to World Children’s Day, involving more than 1,000 children below 17 years old across Malaysia, 69 % said that, if they ran the UN, they would focus on “Ending racism and discrimination and make sure every child is treated fairly”; and in order to help achieve a better world for themselves and other children, 81% said they would “be kind and respectful to one another regardless of race, religion, sex or disability; and 66% said they want to “reach out and make friends with children from a different background from theirs”

This is powerful. These are the values that we must inculcate and nurture in our children, and we can do this most effectively through the education system.

Article 18: Our right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion, including freedom to change religion or belief.

Article 19: Our right to freedom of opinion and expression and also information. In this regard, I would like to quote the words of Human Rights Commissioner, Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein, "Instability is expensive. Conflict is expensive. Offering a space for the voices of civil society to air grievances, and work towards solutions, is free."

And this is what I hope our Open Forum today, will try to achieve -**constructive dialogue** toward practical recommendations and solutions.

Agenda 2030 and SDGs

Ladies and gentlemen,

As you all know the world has an unprecedented development roadmap – the Sustainable Development Goals. The key to implementing the Agenda 2030 and its 17 Goals, 169 targets and 244 indicators - is Goal 16 to "Promote peaceful and inclusive societies, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels". It includes the target to "promote and enforce non-discriminatory laws and policies for sustainable development". And we can achieve this by taking an integrated and bottom up approach with long-term strategies involving multiple-stakeholders.

Eleventh Malaysia Plan

Having worked in many countries, I find the quality of Malaysia's development planning and visioning impressive. And I would like to quote from the Eleventh Malaysia Plan that says "The future of Malaysia depends on Malaysians being united in diversity and sharing a common set of values and aspirations; That diverse religions and spiritual values continue to be respected and accepted; That in the context of national development, social cohesion, and national unity, the Wasatiyyah concept emphasises moderation, balance, justice, and excellence in all spheres of life for the individual and the community with the aim of developing a harmonious Malaysian society".

The recent Statement of the Malay Rulers, also serves as a reminder of the importance of harmony and tolerance in a multicultural and multi-ethnic society like Malaysia. And that we can never take this for granted and need to be watchful to constantly identify new ways of bolstering this.

The UN Country Team stands ready to support Malaysia's efforts in achieving its progressive aspirations; as well as the positive recommendations that we hope will come out of today's Forum - toward greater sustainability, peace and harmony.

And before I end, may I ask you to join me in recognising all human rights defenders in Malaysia and elsewhere, who strive to selflessly protect what is fundamental to all human beings – by giving them a big round of applause.

Thank you.