HUMAN RIGHTS LEADERSHIP SEMINAR ORGANISED BY PRIME MINISTER’S OFFICE IN COLLABORATION WITH THE COMMONWEALTH SECRETARIAT FROM FRIDAY 10 TO SATURDAY 11 FEBRUARY 2012

OPENING ADDRESS BY THE HONOURABLE ATTORNEY GENERAL

Hon. Sutyadeo Moutia, Minister of Civil Service & Administrative Reforms

Honourable Mrs Cheong, Puisne Judge and Chairperson of the Institute for Judicial and Legal Studies

Mr Dhiraj Seetulsingh, Chairperson, National Human Rights Commission

Mr Dhiren Dabee, Solicitor General

Mrs Vydyra Narayan, Ombudsperson for Children

Mrs Fong Weng-Poorun, Permanent Secretary, Prime Minister's Office

Dr Sanusi & Mr Clifford Walsh from the Commonwealth Secretariat

Members of the diplomatic corps

All protocols observed

Ladies and Gentlemen

I am delighted to be present at this seminar organized by the Prime Minister’s Office in collaboration with the Commonwealth Secretariat. I wish to put on record my deep appreciation of the Commonwealth Secretariat for its invaluable contribution in the field of human rights in Mauritius and for its consistent assistance as highlighted by my colleague with regard to the Universal Periodic Review in the same venue last year when Mrs. Purna Sen and Mrs. Cochrane were the prime actors of the Commonwealth Seminar on UPR follow-up and implementation in Africa.
What is the objective of having a seminar on human rights leadership as opposed to human rights simply?

This is, in my view, the very first question that anyone in the audience should ask oneself today. Is it about building and fostering a culture of human rights or is it about setting up a plan of action for the guidance of the people as far as human rights are concerned or both?

Our vision of human rights leadership should be about nurturing in each and every citizen of Mauritius, first and foremost, respect for his fellow human being.

This is, I believe the starting point. One must be able to understand that each citizen of the world, for that matter, is entitled to live a life of dignity no matter from which social background that person comes from and from whichever continent he belongs to. I need not recall that the Constitution of Mauritius, in its Chapter II, lays down the fundamental rights and freedoms that the Mauritian citizen is entitled to and that any person whose rights are infringed can apply to the Supreme Court for redress.

Ladies and Gentlemen

This is what also democracy is about and I need not stress on the importance that the State of Mauritius affords to the rule of law where the Mauritian citizen feels secure that in case his rights are in jeopardy, there is an independent mechanism to turn to. This is why I feel strongly that there should be on-going campaigns carried out on the protection and promotion of human rights by institutions responsible for the upholding of human rights, be it the National Human Rights Commission, the Office of the Ombudsperson for Children amongst others.

In fact, the promotion and protection of human rights requires leadership in all sectors of Government, the police, civil society as well as the national human rights institutions.
Human rights principles should be integrated in the curricula of school children, at primary and secondary level as well as tertiary level. Human rights should also form part of the training curricula of law enforcement officers in order to be able to develop accountable and an effective police and prisons service. We should strive hard to be able to import international human rights standards in Mauritius at all levels and I am confident that the Mauritian citizen has the drive and stamina to do so.

Ladies and Gentlemen

At Government level, I would also like to share with you some of the recent developments in the field of human rights. In December last year, the Bail Act was amended to allow courts to impose non-financial conditions and to provide for the use of electronic bracelets while releasing a person on bail. Release on parole which was previously restricted to weekends only now applies to week days as well. Another ground breaking measure has been the sittings of the Bail and Remand Court during week-ends and public holidays in order to process and hear bail applications if need be. The Legal Aid Act has been amended to provide respectively for a new threshold of Rs 500,000 as regards value of assets owned and Rs 10,000 for monthly earnings so that a larger number of persons can benefit from legal aid. Last but not least, the Police and Criminal Evidence Bill which aims at ensuring that an individual’s constitutional rights are better protected is being circulated for public consultation.

Ladies and Gentlemen

I will end on those positive developments, hoping that you will come up with a lot of suggestions about what human rights leadership is all about and you will equally make known your expectations during this seminar. I wish you all fruitful deliberations.

I now have the pleasure to declare open seminar.

I thank you for your kind attention.