

## **Universal Periodic Review on Human Rights: Thoughts from the Palais des Nations**

*An Op-Ed by Mr. Luc Stevens, UN Resident Coordinator in Thailand*

The opening words of the United Nations Charter, “We the Peoples,” which I have sworn an oath to uphold, illustrate the humanity and connection that unites all of us within these United Nations. These words bind us together as we work toward constantly improving the human condition in all corners of the earth, for everyone, everywhere.

As part of this collective endeavour, all member states of the United Nations undergo a peer review of their human rights record every four and a half years under the aegis of the Human Rights Council’s Universal Periodic Review, or UPR. For Thailand, this took place on 11 May. It was therefore opportune for me to attend the UPR in Geneva last week as over 100 member states provided Thailand with recommendations to fully realise, promote and protect the fundamental human rights of all people within the Kingdom. The recommendations reflected many of the member states’ priorities, such as addressing basic education and healthcare, needs of migrants and refugees, safeguards to prevent torture, fundamental freedoms of speech, association, and assembly, freedom from intimidation, arbitrary arrest and detention, ending the death penalty for economic crimes, and ensuring civilians receive fair trials in civilian courts, among others. The member states provided these recommendations with the full understanding and appreciation of the great transition this country is going through and the social and political conflicts the country is trying to overcome.

I noted member states spoke with a shared purpose and provided specific, actionable recommendations on the core premise that all human rights and fundamental freedoms are equal, interdependent and mutually reinforcing: deterioration in some rights impacts others. The recommendations applied to all people, everywhere in Thailand without reservation. I did not hear any member state recommend some rights should apply only to some people or some rights should only apply some of the time. Their message was clear: recommendations were provided without reservation to affiliation, ethnicity, political persuasion, economic status, gender identity, sex, social status or any other attribute or circumstance.

Indeed, the scores of member states I saw in the chambers of the Human Rights Council at the Palais de Nations reflected the words of the UN Charter, “We are all born equal in dignity and rights.” Their presence on that cold, rainy Geneva morning underscored their shared commitment to supporting the Thai people working toward fully honouring the country’s human rights commitments and obligations freely entered into by The Kingdom as a sovereign state, in the form of a variety of human rights treaties and conventions. The challenges of reform and national reconciliation that Thailand faces were acknowledged, as was the important fact that without the full promotion and protection of all human rights, those efforts will be all the more challenging and all the more prone to faltering.

The Thai delegation to the UPR process in Geneva acknowledged the work ahead of them and welcomed the collaboration and support of UN human rights mechanisms and the other member states to improve the situation back home. Some member states explicitly offered their assistance. Importantly, the Thai delegation accepted 181 of the 249 recommendations provided by during the session, promised to make additional voluntary commitments, and agreed to provide the Human Rights Council with a voluntary mid-term review of their progress two years from now. Some of those recommendations accepted included nearly two dozen related to freedoms of expression, speech and assembly; others required changes to standing NCPO orders or existing legislation and were brought back to Bangkok for further deliberation. The Thai delegation noted their commitment to the member states assembled in the hall to engaging civil society and other Thai stakeholders openly in the process of UPR follow-up.

We have much work to do together. The United Nations stands ready, as we have always done, to work with the Thai people to achieve the broad range of human rights and fundamental freedoms outlined in the international human rights instruments to which Thailand is a state-party and which international law prescribes. Thailand is a leader within the G77 and sustainable human development is one of the core agenda and, like the United Nations, Thailand recognizes that diluting fundamental human rights and fundamental freedoms for whatever reason suppresses human development and makes any progress unsustainable.

As I walked through the damp gardens of the Palais des Nations with the peacocks running wild and the flowers blooming, thinking about the history made there and reminded of the decisions that have affected so much of humanity, I am hopeful that the UPR review and the Thai government's acceptance of recommendations from its peers can lead to improving the lives and wellbeing of millions of people in Thailand.

Importantly, these recommendations spoke to the need to embrace public debate and discussion as a means to seeking sustainable, peaceful national development. Over the next three months, the Thai people, in collaboration with their government, have the opportunity to chart a constructive, actionable course to not only fulfill and protect the human rights of all people in Thailand, but to return Thailand to its human rights leadership role within the community of nations.