OPENING OF LEADERSHIP SEMINAR ON HUMAN RIGHTS ORGANISED BY PRIME MINISTER’S OFFICE IN COLLABORATION WITH COMMONWEALTH SECRETARIAT

FRIDAY 10th FEBRUARY 2012
1800 HRS – MARITIM HOTEL

ADDRESS BY HON. S. MOUTIA,
MINISTER OF CIVIL SERVICE AND ADMINISTRATIVE REFORMS

Hon. Yatin Varma, Attorney-General,
Mr. Neewoor, Secretary for Foreign Affairs,
Excellencies, Members of the Diplomatic Corps,
Dr Sanusi and Mr Walsh from the Commonwealth Secretariat,
Mr Dabee, Solicitor General,
Mr. Seeballuck, Senior Chief Executive, Ministry of Civil Service and Administrative Reforms
Mrs. Fong Wen-Poorun, Permanent Secretary, Prime Minister’s Office
Permanent Secretaries and Heads of Departments,
Distinguished Guests
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Good Evening!

It is not very often that we have the opportunity to address a floor of so many heads of Ministries and other high level officials of government. I am, therefore, delighted to be in your
midst this evening for the opening of this **Leadership Seminar on Human Rights**, organised by the Prime Minister’s Office, in collaboration with the Commonwealth Secretariat.

**Before proceeding further, I wish to extend a very warm welcome to Dr. Sanusi and Mr. Walsh** from the Commonwealth Secretariat to which we are thankful for its valuable partnership.

**Ladies and Gentlemen,**

Mauritius is party to various Human Rights Conventions and Treaties. We are regularly reviewed by UN Committees and we go through the **Universal Periodic Review** which assesses the human rights situation across sectors. In fact, respect for human rights is enshrined in our Constitution and we are providing for **further consolidation** of such rights through the **Equal Opportunities (Amendment) Act** which has already been proclaimed. This new legislation provides for the creation of a full-fledged Equal Opportunities Commission.

Every single Mauritian deserves the right to be treated in a **dignified manner.** As a national human rights institution, the **Equal Opportunities Commission** will have the power to *eliminate all forms of discrimination and bias* within our society. Our policy orientations clearly indicate that we are **consistent** and **coherent** all the way as we are conscious that there would be no progress in the area of human development without the protection of human rights. It is essential that we foster a **human rights culture**.

We have already set up a **Commission for the Democratization of the Economy** and another one on **Truth and Justice**. The **universalistic principles** with regard to provision of basic benefits, health services and education confirm our commitment, as a nation, to ensure **rights-based access** to essential services. We are one of the few countries in the world which have **voluntarily** submitted a mid-term report to the Human Rights Council on progress in the implementation of recommendations made at our Universal Periodic Review in February 2009. We have improved our legislation, policies and training with regard to human rights.
We are in the process of finalising the Action Plan on Human Rights. It will aim at:

1. *Creating the necessary awareness on the human rights issues across sectors*;
2. *Understanding and analysing the human rights impact at sector level*;
3. *Implementation of policies to improve the human rights landscape in Mauritius; and*
4. *Addressing the gaps as far as sector policies and programmes related to human rights are concerned.*

**Dear participants,** government is conscious of the fact that *top management commitment* is the key factor that would ensure the successful implementation of such measures. Your participation and involvement as Heads of Ministries and Departments is expected to further improve your skills and knowledge to assess the human rights situation. You will be expected to ensure that policy formulation at the level of your organizations give due consideration to *human rights friendliness* in line with the Action Plan.

This year, we are coming up with a **Protection of Human Rights (Amendment) Bill** which will provide for the *revamping of our National Human Rights Commission.* This will help to increase *public service providers’ awareness* of the rights of the individual. It will, however, also increase the *risk of legal challenge by service users* as those who feel aggrieved would be able to resort to legal action.

At this point, **ladies and gentlemen,** I wish to place on record my unreserved appreciation of the Commonwealth Secretariat for its unflinching support to the Government of Mauritius in the overall development of the country. In April last year, the Commonwealth Secretariat hosted the **Universal Periodic Review Seminar in Mauritius** for all countries which had been reviewed in 2008 and 2009. This has been a real boost for our image as a country
respectful of human rights. Our country stands to gain international recognition as a reliable trade and political partner where human rights are respected.

In addition to human rights projects, Government is thankful to the Commonwealth Secretariat for its assistance in capacity building in the civil service. You are surely aware that my ministry is actively engaged in administrative reforms. The reforms process, as you know, can only aim at increasing the speed and effectiveness of service delivery. There can be no better way of achieving this objective than by the integration of human rights in sectoral policies and processes. There should, thus, be a clear statement of rights that needs to be taken into account in the delivery of public services.

My vision as Minister of Civil Service and Administrative Reforms is to have a change in the work culture where decisions are made with reference to basic human rights, such as the right to choose and the right to information; where public services are provided in a way which is fair, which respects peoples’ dignity and diversity and which guarantees their rights to equal treatment. Government expects that public service decision-makers work within a framework that guarantees basic human rights.

It is, thus, my firm intention to see that the proposed Civil Service Reforms Strategy study, that my Ministry will soon commission, integrates human rights in order to further consolidate the values that underpin the Civil Service and make them an issue of constant concern and practice.

My Ministry already has a Code of Ethics for Public Officers which calls for a steadfast adherence to the fundamental values of the public service- the values of integrity, objectivity, impartiality and honesty that constitute its very foundation. In addition, my ministry has
ratified the African Charter on Values and Principles of Human Rights. We are soon going to report progress of implementation to the African Union.

To ensure that public officers have a medium to voice out their problems a help desk is being set up at my ministry with a dedicated officer in order to hear and address problems that officers of the civil service might have to face, including any perceived deprivation of their rights. It is only when the basic rights of the officer are respected that he or she will be inclined to respect the rights of others.

The Ministry of Education and Human Resources is also partnering with the Secretariat for the organization of the 18th Conference of Commonwealth Education Ministers which will be held in Mauritius in August this year. I understand that the Prime Minister’s Office is also collaborating with the Commonwealth Secretariat regarding the project to integrate human rights across the curriculum at pre-primary, primary and secondary levels in schools. This will certainly foster a human rights culture in the generations that will assume leadership in future. It will have desirable outcomes with regard to an awareness of their own rights and respect for the rights of others as well as social cohesion.

I would like to thank the Prime Minister, Dr. the Honourable Navinchandra Ramgoolam for his personal interest in holding a seminar on human rights under the aegis of his office which eloquently demonstrates his determination to take human rights to higher levels and broader dimensions.

I hope this seminar will meet the objectives I have enumerated earlier and that it will provide Heads of Departments and Ministries with an excellent opportunity for introspection into the human rights policies in their respective organisations with a view to chart the way forward by adopting best practices in the area of human rights.
I shall, thus, leave you with a thought by late Margaret Chase Smith who served as a Representative from 1940 to 1949 and a U.S. Senator from 1949 to 1973, the first woman to serve in both houses of Congress. I quote:

My creed is that public service must be more than doing a job efficiently and honestly. It must be a complete dedication to the people and to the nation with full recognition that every human being is entitled to courtesy and consideration, that constructive criticism is not only to be expected but sought, that smears are not only to be expected but fought, that honour is to be earned, not bought.

Unquote.

I wish you fruitful deliberations.

I thank you for your attention.