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Opening statement

Mr President, distinguished delegates, representatives of civil society,

It is an honour and privilege to attend the Universal Periodic Review on behalf of the Government of Iceland. We are grateful for the opportunity to provide information on the human rights situation in Iceland. This past Saturday, parliamentary elections were held in Iceland and I am proud to say that now 48% of our members of parliament are women, placing us No. 4 worldwide. Currently we are in the midst of forming a new Government. Unfortunately, the Minister of the Interior was not able to be with us here today and I, the Permanent Secretary of the Ministry, lead the delegation on his behalf. The Minister sends his best regards.

Mr President,

International cooperation for human rights is essential in implementing and ensuring global and universal human rights. The Universal Periodic Review is an important pillar of the Human Rights Council and has proven to be instrumental in promoting and strengthening human rights universally, providing a unique opportunity to address both achievements and challenges within all states. The Member States of the United Nations have a duty to support each other in this regard and take due responsibility for human rights protection, internationally and domestically. The situation can always be improved.

Icelandic law is based on a dualistic system, whereby national legislation is adapted to conform with international conventions ratified by Iceland. In the view of Icelandic authorities, the way to ensure the greatest compliance possible with an international human rights convention, is to amend the relevant domestic legislation. While stipulations in international agreements cannot be directly applied to individuals or entities without implementing legislation, existing national laws must be interpreted in accordance with international law. It is not sufficient to incorporate a convention as a whole into the domestic legislation. Although sometimes called for by stakeholders, politicians and others, it is the view of the authorities, which is strongly supported by legal experts in this field, that such an approach tends to be illusory as it does not constitute a sufficiently effective implementation of the convention in question. Consequently, the ratification process can take time in Iceland which has of course caused some criticism. The Icelandic authorities emphasize their absolute devotion to continue this ambitious approach to the implementation of international human rights obligations.

Mr President,

Promoting and protecting human rights is a core priority for the Icelandic Government. Human rights are well protected in Iceland, but there is always room for improvement. Iceland is a peaceful and prosperous country with a long tradition of democracy and a robust institutional framework for protecting human rights, such as a well-functioning judicial system and a parliamentary ombudsman, to name a few. For seven years in a row, Iceland has topped the World Economic Forum Gender Gap Index and it is certain that this high degree of gender equality plays a vital role in ensuring a just society.

We also have a very active civil society, which scrutinizes the actions of authorities and holds them accountable. It is therefore an

indispensable part of human rights protection within the country. The Icelandic authorities highly appreciate their contribution and acknowledge their achievements.

Moreover, Iceland is proud to have remained in the top seat of the Global Peace Index since it was launched in May 2007. The index measures social stability, participation in armed conflicts, its relations with neighboring countries, violence, crime, and the percentage of prison population.

Nevertheless, Icelandic authorities are conscious of the fact that human rights cannot be taken for granted. We need to continue strengthening human rights protection domestically and internationally, not the least in order to increase the protection of particularly vulnerable groups. We therefore welcome the opportunity to take part in the UPR review and look forward to the interactive dialogue and to receiving advice and recommendations.

Our first UPR review in 2011 resulted in 84 recommendations, the vast majority of which were accepted by Icelandic authorities. The current report describes our progress since 2011, in particular towards implementing the abovementioned 84 recommendations. An interministerial working group was formed which was responsible for preparing the report and most of them are represented in the Icelandic delegation here today.

The working group placed great emphasis on consulting with civil society. To that end, an open meeting was held where representatives from the relevant ministries, other authorities, civil society, as well as individuals, sat together and discussed issues which the participants themselves found important and relevant for the UPR process. At the meeting, the participants prepared comments, ideas and recommendations which they submitted to the working group which took them into due consideration when preparing the report and in the preparations for this hearing. More importantly, the comments were

forwarded to the relevant authorities for their further consideration and, where relevant, possible implementation.

Furthermore, a draft report was distributed to relevant stakeholders, including civil society and participants in the open meeting seminar, and it was also published on the website of the Ministry of the Interior for comments. Again, the working group received useful comments and criticism which were duly considered. Civil society has also submitted alternative reports to the Human Rights Council for the purposes of this review, which will of course strengthen its outcome and contribute to the fruitful exchange that we will have here today. To them we are most grateful.

Mr President,

The strongest criticism received domestically during the UPR preparation concerned the situation of persons with disabilities, in particular the slow process of the ratification of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. We are proud to announce that on the 20th of September 2016, Althingi, the Icelandic Parliament adopted unanimously a parliamentary resolution regarding this matter, allowing the Icelandic Government to fully ratify the Convention, which it did on 24 September 2016.

I would like to highlight some further developments which have taken place since we submitted our report in the beginning of August. Most of them are also measures we have taken as a direct result of the UPR process. I will not give an exhaustive list of those developments now though, as my colleague, Ms Ragna Bjarnadóttir, the human rights expert of the Ministry of the Interior, will discuss those in more detail later when she will provide answers to the questions that are put to us here today as well as to those we have received in advance.

It is a high priority in Iceland to promote gender equality and ensure that women and men enjoy equal rights and status in all respects. Iceland has been successful in many areas of gender equality and this year marks the 40th anniversary of the first gender equality legislation in Iceland.

In 2008 a new comprehensive Act on Gender Equality was adopted which defined the terms gender-based direct and indirect discrimination in Icelandic law for the first time. Recent changes to the act allow the introduction of a wage equality standard. Modelled on international standards, the Equal-Pay-System Certification for companies and institutions is an unprecedented and pioneering step in the sphere of Gender Equality

A recent action plan on gender equality identifies a number of different tasks regarding gender equality which shall be introduced during the next four years. Amongst these are gender mainstreaming in all policy and decision making, gendered budgeting, and a review of the current gender equality act. Thematic areas of the action plan include the labour market and equal pay, gender-based violence, education, health and international cooperation. It also introduces, for the first time, a special chapter on men and gender equality, in an effort to increase the role of men in achieving gender equality.

Following the financial crisis in 2008, the maximum payment to parents during parental leave was lowered significantly resulting in less participation of fathers. The maximum payment was recently increased significantly which will hopefully enable both parents to take parental leave.

A proposal on revision of the social security act, mentioned in our report, was approved by the Althingi in October. The changes will simplify the benefit system and increase the flexibility of voluntary retirement. Furthermore, the minimum pension of old age pensioners

with the lowest income has been increased to ensure an adequate standard of living.

Mr President,

As to recent changes in relation to issues concerning asylum-seekers, refugees, immigration and integration, I would like to note that a cross-party parliamentary committee and the Ministry of the Interior worked together to produce a legislative proposal which was adopted by Althingi last June as the new Act on Foreigners. The new legislation will substantially change the current landscape regarding immigration and asylum in Iceland. It provides for increased safety for people seeking international protection, with special focus being placed, inter alia, on the best interests of the child, vulnerability and the situation of stateless persons. The new legislation provides a time limit of 18 months for the process of reviewing applications for international protection as well as applications for residency. The law further provides for the establishment of a reception and screening centre for asylum seekers, where their needs and health conditions will be assessed upon arrival.

The new legislation will enter into force on 1 January 2017. It is an important step in addressing the increasing numbers of people seeking protection in Iceland in a humane manner. This year the number of asylum seekers arriving in Iceland is predicted to reach 1000, compared to 355 last year and 176 in the year 2014. We have, in spite of this increase, managed to reduce the application processing time, while still adhering to a humanitarian standard.

Althingi adopted the first action plan on integration in September which is based on statutory law. It consists of five pillars; society, family, education, labour market and issues related to refugees. The

aim is to find opportunities to draw on people's diverse cultural backgrounds and utilize immigrants' knowledge and skills to enrich the Icelandic society. Steps are to be taken to ensure that people migrating to Iceland have easy access to public service, both of central and local government. In addition, authorities will put in place measures to encourage active participation in society. The Icelandic authorities will further seek broad consensus with non-governmental organisations, the media and the private sector regarding its implementation.

Mr President,

Education is a high priority in Iceland. The greatest wealth of our nation is the people: not the wealth preserved in the minerals of neither the earth, nor that of the power of the rivers, or that of the abundant living marine resources. It is the wealth constituted by people – with their knowledge and their experiences in other words, the constant journey of the human mind to question and to explore and to invent new solutions.

Education is key to lasting peace, sustainable development and the eradication of poverty. Education is a fundamental human right of which nobody should be deprived. Our aims are, just to mention some areas of great concern, to spread knowledge and promote freedom of expression, enhance sustainable development, to encourage acceptance of cultural diversity and achieve gender equality. These aims are all first and foremost addressed by better education. The Icelandic education system is egalitarian and homogeneous, based on values such as democracy, inclusion, welfare and equal opportunities.

Empowering young people and giving them the opportunity to participate in the decision-making processes concerning education and their future will allow them to flourish on a personal level as well as to build a harmonious society.

In Iceland we strongly support freedom of expression and media. Not only as this is a fundamental human right which is vital for open societies, democracy and free market economies, but also as a key ingredient in realizing our ambitions in education, science and culture. The potentials established by new medias, like the internet, need to be harnessed in the same spirit of freedom, so they contribute to our goals.

However, with this freedom comes responsibility. Domestic authorities as well as the international community need to be conscious to the dangers of hate speech and the need to draw clear boundaries and assign accountability where that is appropriate. The Ministry of Education, Science and Culture has been involved in the „No hate speech movement“ since the year 2014. The national committee has since then been very active in promoting this project. It has indeed been very visible in the society and has benefitted greatly from the active participation of young people.

Mr President,

Human rights remain at the centre of Icelandic policy, domestically and internationally and the Government is devoted to the task of utilizing all means possible to strengthen human rights protection. Earlier this year, for the first time, the Minister of the Interior submitted a human rights report to Althingi aiming to increase cooperation and the flow of information between Government and the parliament. The report outlines an important step for further progress with the establishment of an interministerial human rights steering committee. Its task will be to enhance and coordinate the implementation of human rights commitments and follow up on the outcome of this review. It will build on the experience of the UPR working group.

I am impressed that so many of you have decided to engage with us here today to provide an important perspective on the human rights situation in Iceland. We look forward to the interactive discussion and the resulting recommendations from the current review.

Final remarks

Mr. President,

Allow me to conclude by extending gratitude, on behalf of the Icelandic authorities, to you and all members and observers of the Human Rights Council for the constructive criticism and encouragement as well as the valuable advice and recommendations that Iceland has received during the review. My thanks also go to the Secretariat and the Troika for their support. I also thank the states which sent their questions in advance and those who participated in the review for their useful questions and recommendations.

The Icelandic authorities will certainly take these recommendations seriously and do their utmost to implement them wherever appropriate. The UPR is an important and unique opportunity to reflect on the human rights situation in Iceland and to take stock of where we stand in relation to our international obligations. Today is a reminder that when it comes to human rights there is always room for improvement and we welcome the opportunity to use this dialogue as a tool on our way towards an improved human rights situation in our country.

Your engagement to this aim, which has manifested itself so clearly here today is highly appreciated. I wish you all the best in your important task and it was an honour for me and my delegation to take part.

Thank you!