

Address by Dr Riina Kionka, EU Ambassador to South Africa,
on the occasion of the

Graduation Ceremony of the Centre for Human Rights Programmes, University of Pretoria

(10 December 2019)

Dear students, professors, distinguished guests, ambassadors, colleagues from Brussels,

Ladies and Gentlemen!

It is a great honour for me to address the 20th set of newly minted Graduates in Human Rights and Democratisation in Africa (HRDA) here at the Centre for Human Rights of the University of Pretoria.

To those graduating today, I would like to say "well done!" You have worked hard, you have re-ordered your priorities for a time, you have foregone much for the sake of your studies. This kind of perseverance you will serve you well later on.

For the parents, family members, friends and colleagues present, as well as those who could not join us here today: this is your day as well. You have supported and encouraged your graduate. You must be so proud, and with good reason.

Finally, let's not forget the many teachers, tutors, professors and administrators who guided these graduates along the way. Their success is also your success.

The new graduates will know that today is also **International Human Rights Day**, with this year's theme being "**Youth standing up for human rights**".

Let's think about that for a moment. When you chose to apply for this Masters programme, you chose to stand up for human rights, both as individuals and as a growing network of specialists across the African continent. With your shiny new masters degrees you join the 540 HRDA alumni from 38 countries in Africa. You also join the 3000 alumni of the Global Campus.

This network will be a powerful resource for you in a decade or two. I recall my own graduation ceremony when I finally finished my Ph.D at Columbia University in New York. People told me the same thing. They spoke of the importance of the network. I was sceptical and thought, "how can these same people, friends with whom I struggled together in study groups, commiserated over impossible assignments and drank too much beer, possibly turn into respected professionals later on?" And my friends surely they thought the same of me! But I can tell you now, many moons later, that the advice was right: in 20 years' time you will find your fellow students, those sitting to your right and your left today, in the most unlikely, but most useful, of places.

This is a graduation speech, after all, so I cannot resist the temptation to give a bit of advice. And **my first piece of advice** is this: **recognise that you are part of this growing cohort of human rights aficionados, nurture those ties and contribute to that community**. Because it needs you, but you will also need the community.

Allow me point out that you are graduating at a time when **human rights and democracy are increasingly coming under attack around the world**, with very real results for ordinary and extraordinary people.

Many governments are now refusing to recognise that **protecting and promoting human rights** is not a political choice to be made, but rather **a legal obligation** that stems from commitments those same governments have taken under international law.

In addition, the **universal and indivisible nature of human rights is now also being challenged by those who seek to redefine it in relativist terms**. This is what we confront when we hear arguments that development must come before human rights; that social and economic rights should be separated from the civil and political; that traditional values are more important than others, especially in the private domain.

To top it off, we are also seeing today a generalised **erosion of confidence in the international rules based order and multilateralism**. We see this in security policy, in trade disputes, in climate policy and also in human rights: some countries are rejecting UN Special Procedures; others are withdrawing from the UN Human Rights Council; still others act in ways that undermine the International Criminal Court, suggesting acceptance of impunity for gross violations, including even genocide.

And here you are, newly minted specialists in Human Rights! So **my second message** to you is this: you have a lot of work to do, but please do so with the confidence that **you will make a difference**. Because you will.

And what will you do with this shiny new diploma? Some of you will work in the public services of your countries, in the national human rights institutions, the legal professions or in international bodies such as the UN or the EU. Others of you will channel your energy to the many outstanding and committed NGOs who champion human rights every day. And still others of you will work in private sector, which is realising more and more that exercising good Corporate Social Responsibility is good business, because consumers are less likely to buy a product that stems, for instance, from the exploitation of child labour or from a country which systematically violates human rights.

No matter what your future holds, it will be fulfilling. It will be tough, it will exhaust and exhilarate you, it will bring you cries of pain and tears of joy. I speak from experience: I worked full time on human rights for seven years, four of those as the Personal Representative of the European Union's first High Representative for foreign policy Javier Solana.

High Representative Solana was a tough boss, because he wanted to make things happen. I remember his asking me once about where we were on his idea of placing gender advisors into the EU's military operations on the ground. I detailed for him the workflow in the committees

tasked with agreeing the concept paper, what the open questions were on the roadmap, difficulties in advancing on the action plan, bla bla bla. Solana, in his inimitable fashion, turned to me, exasperated, and burst out, "Riina, I don't care about papers and procedures and committees, give me results!"

And that is **my third and final piece of advice: focus not on process but on results.**

But given that it may take blood, sweat and tears to get those results, don't forget to take care of yourselves, too. Those of you who have worked a lot with human rights defenders know that a critically important part of supporting these brave men and women is to offer them a respite: give them the chance to take a break, to get them out of a dangerous situation, to offer relief from the constant stress of doing this work. And to point out the obvious: this work is so stressful because nothing less than peoples' lives are at stake.

And the same goes for those who work on human rights full time. As you all know from flying on commercial aircraft, **"if the oxygen mask drops, first put on your own and only then help someone next to you who requires assistance.**

So there you have **my condensed advice: first, nurture your network; second, know that you are making a difference; and third, focus on results. But don't forget to recharge your own batteries, because human rights work is tough.**

In closing, a word about this continent. You may have noticed that last week on Sunday, the new EU leadership for the coming five years took office. This week, the **new Commission President, Ursula von der Leyen, made her very first trip outside the EU to Africa**, to the seat of the AU in Addis. This is a powerful signal of the EU's renewed interest in partnering with Africa.

And this is also precisely **why** the EU has been a proud funder of this programme, the HRDA, since it began 20 years ago. This programme trains human rights professionals for the African continent, it fosters collaboration among a network of African universities, it forms an integral part of the Global Network of regional programmes.

We see this as a win/win. So with your graduation today, the EU wins as well. We are proud of you.

Graduates of 2019, I wish each of you the very best!