



UHRC Statement on

‘Walk to Work’ Protests

Friday 15th April 2011

Kampala

Background

The Uganda Human Rights Commission has observed with concern the events of Monday 11th April 2011 and Thursday 14th April 2011 that have unfortunately led to injuries to persons and disruption of some people's livelihoods. The incidents which involved some members of the opposition wishing to walk to work to protest the recent rise in fuel, food and commodity prices in the country were yesterday seen to spill over to other towns in the country where they degenerated into riots, leading to acts of lawlessness by some members of the public.

Although the Commission appreciates the unfavourable economic situation in the country recent reports indicate that it is not unique to Uganda alone but it is a global trend.

Concerns of the Uganda Human Rights Commission

Developments in the country following the recent walk to work protest by members of the opposition have consequently raised the following issues of concern to the Commission:

- i) There is need to observe that there is a Constitutional order in Uganda which underscores the observance of the rule of law at all times by all.
- ii) There is no prescribed mode of movement for people to go to work and therefore walking to work does not break any law or regulation in Uganda. We are however concerned that when one announces the action of walking to work and holds planning meetings for the walk, then it ceases to be a normal walk to work. Such a call would certainly draw other participants which will inevitably lead to an uncontrolled crowd and in turn processions. Such a scenario would automatically call for police intervention to regulate such an activity.
- iii) We have also noted with concern that in some instances the would be protesters turned rowdy and blocked roads, burnt car tyres in the roads

and pelted police with stones, diverting from the stated objectives of the protest.

- iv) The Commission also notes that the events of yesterday following the walk to work protest regrettably led to the disruption of economic activities in the suburbs of Kampala and other towns in the country where they occurred. Such a scenario denies the affected people their livelihood and exacerbates their economic condition.
- v) People wishing to demonstrate have persistently stated that the police requires them to seek permission from it. The Commission has however noted that the police only requires a notification from organisers of demonstrations so that it can ensure that the protests are peaceful and do not infringe on the rights of others
- vi) The Commission recognises the positive steps taken by the police not to use lethal weapons while policing violent demonstrations as was the case in the past.
- vii) We acknowledge efforts by police yesterday to keep traffic flowing on those roads that had been blocked by protesters.
- viii) The Commission also notes the deliberate effort by some leaders to spread the Walk to Work protest to other towns in the country where the unguided crowds have instead turned riotous.
- ix) The Commission noted with concern that the police fired tear gas which unfortunately strayed into schools, Health Centers and homes affecting children, women and the sick members of society. However the Commission also notes that the Walk to Work protesters had sought refuge in some of the above mentioned facilities.
- x) We also noted with concern the provocation against the police by some of the protesters when they threw stones at them, closed roads and some physically manhandled them

- xi) Whereas the Commission noted that one journalist was reported to have been injured in the scuffle, some sections of the media did not help the situation considering the way they reported on the events.

Recommendations

In order for law and order to be restored in the country and in an effort to promote and protect the rights of all Ugandans, the Uganda Human Rights Commission recommends the following measures:

1. Although demonstrations might turn violent, as has been the case in some instances, it is still the responsibility of the police and other security personnel to act in a lawful and professional manner, using reasonable and proportional force as and when necessary in order to avoid inflicting injuries to persons and to preserve law and order.
2. Police should continue to exercise restraint even while using the non lethal anti-riot weapons in trying to quell violent demonstrations
3. Government is urged to expedite the enactment of the law on Public Order Management which outlines the role of the police, organisers and participants of public demonstrations
4. In the absence of the Public Order and Management law, the police and the public are urged to utilise the UHRC Guidelines on public demonstration which were developed with input from all stakeholders underpinning the need for close cooperation between all the players to ensure orderly and peaceful demonstrations in Uganda.
5. Government should come out and explain to the public the current economic situation and make known its interventions
6. Organisers of demonstrations should cooperate with the police and should endeavour to carry out their activities away from schools , health and business centers

7. Demonstrations or protests should be carried out without disruption to other people's livelihoods or daily chores

Conclusion

The Uganda Human Rights Commission re-affirms its commitment to ensuring the promotion and protection of human rights by all Ugandans and at all times. The Commission recognises Article 29(1) (d) of the 1995 Constitution which provides for the right of every person to the freedom of assembly and demonstration together with others, peacefully and unarmed. The idea that citizens should meet peaceably to consult one another about public affairs and to petition for redress of grievances is at the heart of democratic governance. The right to demonstrate and to protest on matters of public concern is a right 'which is in the public interest that individuals should possess' so long as it is **NOT** done to propagate violence or do anything unlawful.

However, the Commission also notes provisions of the 1995 Constitution under Article 43 which provide for limitations on the enjoyment of rights and freedoms and Article 212 of the same Constitution enjoins the Uganda Police Force to protect life and property and preserve law and order among other functions.

On the other hand, members of the public also have the duty to observe the law, and respect the rights and freedoms of others. As such, we strongly urge the members of the public to always cooperate with the police whenever they wish to exercise their rights to demonstrate, to desist from violent and unlawful acts and respect the rule of law.

FOR GOD AND MY COUNTRY

Med S.K Kaggwa

Chairperson, Uganda Human Rights Commission