**Comments at Nelson Mandela International Day, 18 July 2017**

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Honorable Chairperson

Mr. Michael Moller

Ambassador Nozipho Joyce Mxakato-Diseko

Ambassador Jean-Marie Ehouzou,

Justice Albie Sachs

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen

It is a pleasure to address a few words to you on this special occasion, where we honor one of the outstanding human rights figures of our age. I do so in my capacity as a South African who serves on the UN Human Rights Committee, but also as a member of the Centre for Human Rights, University of Pretoria, the co-host of the Nelson Mandela World Human Rights Moot Court Competition. I do so above all as a member of a generation of people whose lives have been deeply touched by Nelson Mandela and the values he stood for.

Many of the young people in the audience today are participants on the 9th NMWHRMCC. This is an annual competition to which all the law faculties of the world are invited every year, to argue a human rights case before eminent jurists. They do so in Room XX, down the corridor, where the Human Rights Council sits.

The Moot has been described as the “Olympic Games of Human Rights”, and this year a total of 37 teams from 24 counties in all the regions of the world – the largest and most representative group in the history of the competition - have qualified to come to Geneva. Here they will be participating in the final rounds of the Competition during the next few days. We hope this Competition will grow further over the years, and that all the countries represented here today will in future have teams that participate.

Congratulations to all the teams who are with us on having made it to the “Olympics” in your field. We hope that you have already enjoyed and learned from the experience of wrestling with a very challenging human rights problem, and that you will draw inspiration from being here in Geneva. We also hope that you will consider a career in human rights in your own countries, or in the international system. I can certainly say I had the priviledge when I was in my late 20s of coming to Geneva, and walking through these corridors, thinking one day I want to be part of this.

We are delighted that you are here, and also that the Moot coincides with the birthday celebrations of Nelson Mandela. This is not a coincidence: we did it to honour his legacy and the role that this son of the Transkei made on the world stage.

There is no time to recount the impact that Nelson Mandela has had on his country, his region of the world or on each of their own lives. But let me tell you a very brief and simple story about the man in question.

Soon after Nelson Mandela was released from prison, we invited him to speak at what was at the time still the largely white campus of the University of Pretoria. A right wing group hijacked the occasion, and widespread violence broke out, drawing most of us into the fighting. Nelson Mandela had to be evacuated from the campus. He was graceful and said no one expected change to happen overnight.

As organisers, we sat afterwards in the offices of the Centre for Human Rights, many of us with tears in our eyes out of shock at the violence we had experienced and the humiliation at what had happened on our campus. Was the place never going to change?

As we all know, a major transition came to the country as a whole – and also on our campus. Madiba became our first democratically elected president, and worked his magic.

Some ten years after Mandela was evacuated from campus, I found myself in the audience for an event at the University: my daughter’s graduation ceremony. By now, Mr. Mandela had retired from public office. Waiting for the ceremony to begin, I saw a stately old man walking down the corridor, and asked my wife what was Morgan Freeman doing in the audience. As it turned out, Nelson Mandela was there as a private citizen, to attend the graduation of one of his grandchildren.

He sat down directly in front of me and my wife. He was not scheduled to be there, and he was not officially acknowledged, but word went around and everyone knew. Then, as one of the white graduands walked on the stage – her last name was something like Potgieter - she did not stop where she was supposed to receive her degree. She walked past the VC, straight up to the edge of the podium in front of where Mr. Mandela was sitting. She stood still, looking down at him in the audience, and paused, as if for maximum effect. I thought, “here we go again”.

She then put her hands together like this, made a small bow, turned around and received her degree. The audience erupted with applause; she had captured the spirit of the moment.

I told you this story not because everything had changed for good because of one man. I told you the story because it shows how one person can touch the lives of others, however fleetingly, by reminding us through their example of the values of decency and grace which transcends all cultures and times. Those are the values which we reaffirm today, as we celebrate Nelson Mandela’s birthday. We hope you will be touched by the experience, and carry those values further in your own lives, in the many parts of the world where you come from and will go back to after the moot, and where you will be required to be the ones who will make the difference.

Best wishes for the Moot, and happy Nelson Mandela week!