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INTRODUCTION OF THE EXTRAORDINARY VERA CHIRWA AWARD 2017

This is the story of Vera Chirwa and her husband Orton, who were active in the struggle for the independence of Malawi in 1964. Within a short time, the hope, joy and freedom of independence turned to fear, terror and oppression as President Hastings Kamuzu Banda morphed into a brutal dictator. The couple fled into exile and formed the Malawi Freedom Movement. On Christmas Eve in 1981, at a time just like this, they were abducted from Zambia by Malawian security agents, put through a show trial before a traditional court, and sentenced to death. When Vera Chirwa asked the Magistrate what she was accused of, he answered: "Nothing, but you are a culprit!"

Only a year and half later, on 8 June 1983, Orton and Vera Chirwa were waiting to be executed. Their execution date had been set for the next day and, although international pressure saved their lives, Orton Chirwa died in prison nine years later. The conditions under which they were kept bore the hallmarks of the inhumanity visited on democracy activists in that era: they were tortured, often kept in leg irons, and they received inadequate food and medical attention. Although they were in the same prison, Vera was allowed to see her husband only once – shortly before his death. She was not allowed to attend his funeral.

Despite the violent repression, arbitrary arrests, torture and enforced disappearances, President Banda yielded to international pressure, and released Vera Chirwa in 1993. A new constitution ushered in era of multiparty-party democracy. Vera Chirwa soon established a human rights NGO called the Malawi Centre for Advice, Research and Education on Rights (with the appropriate acronym CARER). She remained vocal and passionate in her activism for human rights in Malawi and became a member of the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights in 1999. Fittingly, she served as its Special Rapporteur on Prisons and Conditions of Detention in Africa. Although she retired from the African Commission in 2005, her voice is undiminished in the struggle for human rights in Malawi. She is a towering emblematic figure of the African human rights system as a whole, and an unwavering advocate for social justice around the world.

This, the **Vera Chirwa Human Rights Prize**, was instituted in recognition of her personal sacrifice and singular contribution to the struggle for human rights in Africa. The Vera Chirwa Prize recognises the outstanding professional achievements of a graduate of the LLM programme, and one who epitomises the true African human rights lawyer: they would have made a significant contribution to human rights promotion and protection in Africa; they would have demonstrated a courageous and unwavering commitment to improving the lives of people in Africa; and their achievements will bear the hallmarks of dynamism, originality, and a pioneering spirit.

This is the first time the Vera Chirwa Prize is being awarded as an Extraordinary Prize. It did not involve a process of nomination, shortlisting and selection, as stipulated in the Prize Regulations. Rather it comes as a unanimous decision of the Selection of Committee, which decided to waive the usual requirements.



CITATION OF THE RECIPIENT: CHIEF JUSTICE ABDULAI CHARM

I am proud to present to you the recipient of the first Extraordinary Vera Chirwa Prize.

Mr Charm studied law at Fourah Bay College, University of Sierra Leone - the city on the hill - and left the Sierra Leone Law School as a Barrister-at-Law. His singular professional life is a rare blend of civil service, private practice, civil society work and the international civil service. Includes

Before and after his studies in Pretoria, he served as a Prosecutor in Sierra Leone for nine years (1992 to 2001), first as State Counsel and then as Senior State Counsel; while in private practice, he co-founded the first legal aid centre in Sierra Leone – the Lawyers Centre for Legal Assistance (LAWCLA) in 2001 – serving as Director of Litigation from 2002 to 2003. LAWCLA was co-founded with Mr Melron Nicol-Wilson, also an alumnus of the Centre for Human Rights (LLM in Human Rights and Constitutional Practice, 1998). Mr Charm then worked for the Sierra Leone National Revenue Authority, as Principal Collector (2003-2005), Deputy Commissioner (2005-2007), and Director of Policy and Legal Affairs (2007-2010). In 2011, he was appointed Judge of the High Court and, later, Court of Appeal of Sierra Leone. In 2013, he served as Judge of the Residual Special Court for Sierra Leone.

Mr Charm's singular career path is especially laudable in that he elected to serve his country - the beautiful Salone - which is still struggling in many respects from the devastating effects of a civil war in the 1990s, rather than pursue a lucrative international career – which his studies at the University of Pretoria would have made him more than eligible for.

Mr Charm obtained the Master of Laws degree in Human Rights and Democratisation in Africa, at the Centre for Human Rights, University of Pretoria, in December 2000 - as a member of the pioneer class of this world-renown programme. He is remembered at the Centre for Human Rights as a quiet, intelligent, and efficient student who brought a wealth of experience into the classroom. In his time in Pretoria, it is also his dignified manner and wise ways that made him stand out. These attributes are a real trademark for the Chief Justice.

As I prepared these few remarks, I was struck by an incredible thought: even for me who was working at the Centre when the Chief Justice was a student there, it is now quite hard to remember this giant of a man and a judge as a student in jeans and a T-shirt queuing up to register for a student card etc.

If this is an interesting image, then let me challenge you to image an even more interesting one: can you imagine that Justice Charm was once a little boy - in someone's Class 1 class - like many of us he must have gone to school with Vaseline shining on his face - maybe he was smacked on the back side for not doing his homework - maybe his wonderful mother used to reprimand him for staying out late playing football - maybe he was a teenage boy getting into fights with his friends - and maybe he was a young man running around in the neighborhood doing what young men do.

But then if you know the Chief Justice you would be forgiven for thinking that he was born very serious and very composed.

The fact is that on 28 December 2015, His Excellency President Ernest Bai Koroma appointed Mr Abdulai Charm Chief Justice of Sierra Leone, acknowledging his long, dedicated and outstanding service to this country, and in the hope of the positive contribution that this graduate of the University of Pretoria can bring to the judiciary and the law in Sierra Leone.

Mr Charm has been called to this high office at a time in Sierra Leone's history when democracy is taking root and when there are positive signs that the scars of war are beginning to heal. I have been visiting Sierra Leone myself for the last 12 years and I can testify to the complete transformation in the areas of human rights, democracy and the rule of law. The human rights of women and girls were more fractured here than in most other conflicts in Africa - yet successive governments have worked assiduously to repair, uplift and return dignity to our women and girls.

The only thing that has remained the same in Sierra Leone is the petete leaf soup which I am ashamed to say I am fully addicted to.

Like in all our countries, there is still much to be done to realise human rights in Africa, to entrench the democratic gains and consolidate a strong and independent judiciary. Chief Justice Charm is uniquely qualified to rise to these challenges, with his trademark courage and conviction, quiet but firm hand, and passion for human rights and human development.

We at the Centre for Human Rights are immensely proud of Mr Charm; we are privileged to call him our own, and honoured that he traces some of his roots back to Pretoria.

The Master's degree in Human Rights and Democratisation in Africa was established in 2000, with a vision to fashion a corps of human rights lawyers and professionals to staff the civil service of our countries and the human rights bodies of the African Union. They were intended to strengthen civil society and take up the empty African seats at the United Nations and other multilateral bodies.

Since 2000, 16 years have come and gone. In that time, 465 men and women have passed through our doors. They have come from 38 African countries and have morphed into a veritable army of human rights professionals who are moving Africa forward from human wrongs to human rights.

Sierra Leone holds two records among the 38 countries: at my last count, all but 1 alumni from Sierra Leone are right here - in Sierra Leone - having rolled up their sleeves and taken all the development challenges on their back. The second record is that it has the highest concentration of the most senior and the most experienced legal officers of any other country.

This Master's programme was awarded the UNESCO Prize for Human Rights Education and the first African Union Prize for Human Rights NGOs.

To put into context what we are doing here today, let me share with you - if I may - a small sample of who these people are. They cover the full spectrum of human rights actors:

-- In civil society, right on the ground there are people like Hadiza Mahaman who is helping dig water wells for rural women in Niger, so that they don't have to walk miles to fetch water before dawn to cook for their husbands and wash their children; Melanie Smuts runs the Streetlight Schools in the inner city of Johannesburg, providing a top class education for underprivileged children. Graduates are in every thematic area, including in difficult issues like LGBTI rights in the most difficult countries to work;

-- The head of the human rights Unit in the Cameroon Police Force is an alumnus; Julius Osega from Uganda served in the AU peace keeping mission in Darfur and was killed there; there are alumni the Diplomatic service, including Deputy Ambassador to the United Nations in New York;

-- We are particularly proud of those who have gone into academia, offering human rights training at universities across Africa for the many who cannot come to Pretoria (we receive 650 applications every year for the 30 places). In this regard, there are 40 doctorates earned in universities all around the world - from Notre Dame in the USA, through Cambridge in England, to the University of Hong Kong.

Of these 3 have become full professors and 2 are Deans of Law in Malawi and Ethiopia

-- In quasi-governmental bodies, Yvonne Dausab is the Chairperson of the Law Reform Commission in Namibia;

-- Alumni are Members of the National Human Rights Commission in Mozambique and Tanzania

In the Legislature:

- the Senate Majority Leader in Kenya is an alumnus
- as are a Member of Parliament in Ghana
- and a Parliamentary legal expert in Zambia

In multilateral organisations, alumni serve in

-- UN and AU peace-keeping missions: Darfur, South Sudan, Côte d'Ivoire, Mali, Central African Republic

-- several UN agencies including OHCHR, UNAIDS,

-- International organisations including the Red Cross, the International Office of Migration

-- and worldwide philanthropic organisations like the Open Society and Wellspring Advisors

At the African Union,

-- Lindiwe Khumalo from South Africa is the Deputy Secretary to the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights

-- Solomon Dersso from Ethiopia is a Member of the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights

-- Benyam Mezmur from Ethiopia is the Chairperson of the African Committee of Experts on the Rights and Welfare of the Child and made history by becoming - simultaneously - the Chairperson of the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child

-- George Mukundi from Kenya is Head of African Governance Architecture at the AU

-- Horace Adjolohoun from Benin is the Principal Legal Officer of the African Court on Human and Peoples' Rights (Benin)

At the pinnacle of advancing human rights through the law are the members of the judiciary. In this regard, there are 4

-- 4 High Court Judges: in Kenya, Ghana, Uganda and in Sierra Leone - Prof Hansungule's favourite and my dear sister and friend Lady Justice Miatta Samba

-- The former Attorney General and Minister of Justice in The Gambia is an alumna of the programme

-- Hon Nana-Oye Lithur is Minister of Gender and Children in Ghana

-- Abraham Mwansa is the Attorney-General of Zambia

-- It is fitting at this point that I should single out the newly-appointed Ombudsman of Sierra Leone, Mr Melron Nicol Wilson - a man whose studies at the Centre for Human Rights pre-date even the pioneers of the Master's degree in Human Rights and Democratisation in Africa; and a man whose courageous and visionary work here is what inspired the creation of the Vera Chirwa Prize - of which he is the very first recipient - exactly 10 years ago.

So, from the grassroots through the civil service to the African Union and the UN, there is this legion of dedicated men and women moving Africa forward. At the very top, there is a cabinet Minister, an Attorney-General and an Ombudsman.

But there is only one Chief Justice, the Chief Justice of Sierra Leone, who is at the pinnacle of the judiciary and who bears a heavy responsibility that all alumni salute today - and that is why we are here today.

The strands of courage, sacrifice, vision, passion, determination, commitment, resilience and love for Africa and its people have been woven into a blanket that this man wears with dignity and a lot of grace; he is a man who embodies the spirit of the true African human rights lawyer and whose elegance, charm, warm smile and gentle manner remind us of the greatest African human rights lawyer, Nelson Mandela – the Nelson Mandela who lives in each one of us.

Ladies and gentlemen, I am honoured and delighted to present to Mr Chief Justice Abdulai Charm the first Extraordinary Vera Chirwa Prize.