International Day of the African Child

Theme: “Conflict and Crisis in Africa: Protecting all children’s Rights”

Venue: Rajiv Gandhi Science Centre, Port Louis

Date: Thursday 16th of June, 2016

Time: 12h00

Ag Permanent Secretary, Mrs. Moorghen
Mrs. Charan, Executive Director, MFPWA
Miss Sumputh
Representative of MACOSS
Officials of Secondary Schools
Representatives of NGOs

Dear Students
Members of the jury
Ladies and Gentlemen

It is indeed a pleasure for me, as Minister of Health and Quality of Life, to be in your midst in this afternoon on the occasion of the prize-giving ceremony which is being organized by the Mauritius Family Planning and Welfare Association in the context of the International Day of the African Child.

As you have heard from previous speakers, 40 years ago in Soweto, a township on the outskirts of Johannesburg, about ten thousands black school children marched in protest against the imposition of Afrikans as the medium of education in their school and demanded their right to be taught in their own language. That protest in which many young students lost their lives is considered as the tipping point for the downfall of apartheid in 1994. Today we celebrate and pay tribute to the courage of those African school children.

To keep alive their memory, in 1991, the Organisation of African Unity which today is the African Union decided to declare the 16th June every year the International Day of the African Child. Leaders in Africa recognize that Africa’s future is dependent upon the contributions which African children will make towards it. We have no doubt that African children are determined to work towards a brighter future for our continent. This is why we spend large amounts of material and human resources for this purpose.

Mauritius is part of Africa and our children are Africans. Our children, however, are much better off than the children in most parts of continental Africa. Geography must not affect, but it does
unfortunately, the lives of our children and this is why this day is observed to sensitize people that African children, wherever they are, deserve to be provided with all facilities and opportunities to enable them to reach their full potential. Children and elsewhere in Africa are our priority as they are so important for the future we want. The future of a prosperous Africa will be up to you and other children of Africa. But they must be given all the tools and facilities to shape that future prosperity and here in Mauritius we are spending a lot on that issue.

Dear Students, Ladies and Gentlemen,

While we wish the best for Africa, we must face certain unpleasant facts. Africa is confronted by conflicts in many regions and there are also threats from terrorist or extremist organisations. You will all recall how in 2014, just two years back, more than 200 adolescent girls were abducted in the Chibok region of Nigeria by Boko Haram, a terrorist organization. Two years later there is still no news about what happened to those girls. What is even more chilling is what the leader of Boko Haram said: ‘I abducted your girls. I will sell them in the market. There is a market for selling human beings’.

These girls were abducted from their school. Boko Haram considers western education a sin. Education is key to development and progress and it is destroyed in conflicts. These conflicts in Africa are a major set back in Africa’s development and it is tragic that they result in children being sucked in them as child soldiers by rebel groups. It is even more tragic when they are kidnapped to satisfy the sexual needs of those engaged in armed conflicts.

Unless Africa resolves the conflicts, the fate of the African child will be at risk. Children do not attend school in conflict zones, in fact there are no schools. It is our task as policy makers to ensure that the African child has access to health and a sound education. Wars and conflicts put children in situations where children’s rights are violated, including the right to life and to live in a family environment.

You are aware that the UN General Assembly adopted the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) which are paving the way for a world where poverty will be history and where access to education and affordable health services will be available to all. To achieve this all-encompassing objective by the year 2030, the African child needs the following:

1. Girls and boys must have equal access to education, health and other life-sustaining services,
2. Child marriage, fortunately in Mauritius we don't face it, must be banned,
3. End of domestic abuse for girls,
4. Gender equality must be central in all planning and strategies,
5. Female genital mutilation must be outlawed,
6. Non-discrimination in training and employment opportunities with the requirement for equal pay for equal work.

It is good to remind ourselves that the recruitment and use of children as soldiers is a war crime under
customary international law. The psychological effects on those who were child soldiers are as yet unknown but we must be alive to the harsh reality that these former child soldiers will bear the scar in their memories for the rest of their lives.

Dear students

In Mauritius, fortunately, children have a safe and conducive environment to grow, study and lead healthy lives. Children get the best possible start in life and have access to basic education that is compulsory and free, and to quality health care. There are special programmes for children rights from birth. You should feel happy to live in Mauritius.

Some of these programmes include:

* regular growth monitoring of children to detect abnormal weight gain or loss,
* medical examination of children on their first, second and third birthdays
* vaccination from one month after birth until they leave primary school according to an established vaccination calendar in order to protect them against the common diseases of childhood.
* an ongoing screening program in both primary and secondary schools for the early detection of disease risk factors in school children, and for timely referral for further care and follow up.
* health promotion and the importance of healthy eating and need for physical activity.

Ladies and Gentlemen, dear students,

We are all present here because we care deeply about the health and well-being of our children and also because we want all of you to keep away from dangerous drugs, cannabis or other synthetic drugs and alcohol and unhealthy lifestyles.

At your age you will be tempted, encouraged and even seduced to try and experiment with all sorts of things.

This is part of growing up but you must appreciate that not all experimentation is worthwhile. Make sure that you refrain from embarking on any activity or experience that may be have lasting damage to your health.

I would wish to remind you that the youth of today are the leaders of tomorrow and you will become what you want to become, provided you work hard and you are dedicated and show that you are responsible. You must earn the trust of somebody. Nothing is easy in life. But you have the opportunity, the intelligence and the skills to make possible what may appear to be impossible. We have full trust in you. From the African Child of today, your destiny is to become the confident professionals of tomorrow in order to make Africa a glittering continent with hope and opportunities in order to make Africa an opportunity. As President Franklin Roosevelt once put it: "We cannot always build the future for our youth, but we can build our youth for the future."

I thank you for your attention.