



**Omnia advises Rwanda in landmark climate change proceedings
before the International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea**

LONDON, 21 June 2023: Omnia Strategy LLP (“**Omnia**”) acted for the Government of the Republic of Rwanda in ground-breaking advisory proceedings before the International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea (“**ITLOS**”) on States’ obligations in respect of the ocean and climate change.

The ocean is the most important climate regulator on Earth. As a result, Rwanda, like other landlocked developing countries, remains highly vulnerable to the broader effects of climate change on the marine environment, particularly those impacts that contribute to a cycle of climate harm. In Rwanda, this has resulted in increased fatal flooding and devastating wildfires.

This is despite having done little to contribute to today’s climate emergency. Accordingly, alongside the Commission of Small Island States on Climate Change and International Law (“**COSIS**”), which [requested the advisory opinion](#), and the African Union, Rwanda volunteered detailed submissions to assist ITLOS’s deliberations in this critical case.

Rwanda’s participation is an example of its continuing leadership in environmental matters. At home, it banned plastic bags back in 2008 and all single-use plastics in 2019, and is pursuing a national strategy to achieve development through green technology and sustainable investment. Internationally, Rwanda has co-led (with Peru) efforts to agree a binding global treaty on plastic pollution, facilitated the Kigali Amendment to the Montreal Protocol extending regulation of greenhouse gases, and co-sponsored a UN General Assembly request for an International Court of Justice advisory opinion on States’ obligations in respect of climate change broadly.

Rwanda’s statement to ITLOS was provided on behalf of the Government by Hon Dr Emmanuel Ugirashebuja, Rwanda’s Minister of Justice and Attorney General, coordinated by his Chief Technical Advisor Dr Doris Uwicyeza Picard, and in partnership with the Ministry of Environment.

ITLOS, established by the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (“**UNCLOS**”) in 1996, is an independent judicial body with jurisdiction over disputes and other matters concerning the interpretation or application of UNCLOS. The COSIS request asks the Tribunal to define:

*“the specific obligations of State Parties to the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (the “**UNCLOS**”), including under Part XII:*

(a) to prevent, reduce and control pollution of the marine environment in relation to the deleterious effects that result or are likely to result from climate change, including through ocean warming and sea level rise, and ocean acidification, which are caused by anthropogenic greenhouse gas emissions into the atmosphere?

(b) to protect and preserve the marine environment in relation to climate change impacts, including ocean warming and sea level rise, and ocean acidification?”

This unprecedented request for an advisory opinion promises to advance the international community's understanding of international law in general, and the law of the sea in particular. At issue (among other things) is the extent of States' due diligence obligations, including in light of their Paris Agreement commitments. It comes against a background of ongoing efforts to give effect to the 'polluter pays' principle, including through technical and financial assistance, reparations and the Loss and Damage Fund agreed at COP27 in November 2022.

Rwanda's statement to ITLOS sets out its understanding of the scope and application of UNCLOS and the rules on the protection and preservation of the marine environment, including in respect of marine pollution. Rwanda emphasises the urgent need for States to cooperate on a global and regional basis and highlights the importance of fair and equitable burden-sharing. In particular, that developed States, which have contributed the most to climate change, should take the lead and bear the greatest burden on global mitigation and adaptation measures.

Rwanda's international legal team was led by Omnia's [Cherie Blair CBE, KC](#), who said:

“We are privileged to support Rwanda at this pivotal moment as the country continues to show its commitment and leadership to resolving the extraordinary environmental challenges of the day. No part of the world can ignore the climate emergency and Rwanda's submission is an important contribution to the work of the Tribunal and the development of international law. Above all, it marks a significant milestone in ongoing efforts to clarify States' duties to mobilise and cooperate to meet the climate crisis we are all facing.”

[Adam Smith-Anthony](#), Partner and Head of Omnia's Human Rights practice, also commented:

“The science on human-induced climate change is indisputable and alarming, and demands that States and their partners step up and turn environmentalist rhetoric into meaningful action. Rwanda has a record of doing just this, from being one of the first countries to ban plastic bags back in 2008 to its historic campaign with Peru to forge international agreement on addressing plastic pollution. Omnia is privileged to throw the weight of its public international law expertise and passion behind Rwanda's constructive engagement with these advisory proceedings.”

The Omnia team also includes Associates [Lauren Lederle](#) and [Lodovica Raparelli](#) and Analyst [Ben Wheadon](#), in collaboration with distinguished public international law and law of the sea specialists [Lord Verdirame KC](#) and [Simon Olleson](#) of Twenty Essex.

Omnia is an international law firm founded in 2011 by Cherie Blair CBE, KC, with a unique law+ approach that combines legal expertise with experience across policy, business and communications. Omnia is trusted by government, corporate and private clients to provide legal and strategic counsel on a broad spectrum of matters, including international arbitration, business and human rights, public international law and more unconventional problem-solving. The firm has an incomparable specialism and record in international governance and accountability, assisting and advising a broad range of clients in navigating and utilising complex international frameworks to assert and defend their rights.

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