18th Session of the Intergovernmental Working Group on the Effective Implementation of the Durban Declaration and Programme of Action

Opening Address by Michelle Bachelet, High Commissioner for Human Rights
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Excellencies,

It is my pleasure to welcome you to this session of the Intergovernmental Working Group, which focuses on the upcoming 20th anniversary of the Durban Declaration and Programme of Action.

The Durban World Conference represents a milestone in our common fight against racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance. For the first time, a UN Conference addressed the deep historical roots of contemporary racism, acknowledged that slavery and the slave trade are – and should always have been – crimes against humanity, and analysed the legacy of the some of the most appalling chapters of our human history.

That was the beginning of an extremely important exercise. It is impossible to design effective corrective measures and to dismantle discriminatory structures and institutions without an honest assessment of the past, and without acknowledging the consequences of the Transatlantic Slave Trade and of enslavement and colonialism in present times.

The Conference acknowledged that Africans and people of African descent are victims of racism and racial discrimination. It recognised that this is also true of Asians and people of Asian descent, indigenous peoples, Mestizo people, migrants, displaced persons, victims of human trafficking, people belonging to national or ethnic, religious and linguistic minorities, including Roma, Gypsies, Sinti and Travellers among others.

In Durban, countries also recognized with deep concern increases in anti-Semitism and Islamophobia, as well as violent movements based on racism and discriminatory ideas against Jews, Muslims and Arab communities. Unfortunately, these concerns persist nowadays and are on the rise in a number of countries.

The Durban Declaration and Programme of Action constitutes a holistic agenda. It encompasses measures to deliver remedies to victims of racism, to strengthen education and awareness raising, to fight poverty and marginalization, and to secure inclusive development.

It also provides an overview of what racism and racial discrimination looks like in the twenty-first century, including in new forms such as hate speech on digital platforms.

The Durban agreement is a milestone: it was here that Governments acknowledged that racism exists in every country and declared that the fight against it should be a priority for all nations.

Regrettably, recent months have reminded us that despite the existence of an excellent international normative framework and solemn commitments, there is still a long way to go for human rights to be equally enjoyed by all.

One stark example is COVID-19.

The pandemic is a crisis like no other. Over one million people have lost their lives. Coupled with the health crisis, we are now faced with the deepest economic recession since the Second World War. We may witness the first rise in global poverty since 1998, pushing more than 100 million people into extreme poverty.

As we have seen since the beginning of this crisis, while the virus itself does not discriminate, its impacts certainly do.

People who were already in vulnerable and disadvantaged situations, whose voices have been silenced and whose interests are rarely served, are the worst affected by COVID-19, through health or socio-economic impacts.

Among them are indigenous peoples, people of African descent and people belonging to national or ethnic, religious and linguistic minorities, whose rights have been denied by systemic racial discrimination and the legacy of racism. Groups facing racial discrimination are often more likely to work in the informal sector, many living in poverty and at risk of losing their jobs without any social protection.

Since the outbreak of the pandemic, more than 1.6 billion children have been affected by school closures. Yet again, those facing racial discrimination are most often the ones with fewer conditions to study at their homes, fewer digital skills and limited or no access to the Internet. Some may even never return to school.

The pandemic has also revealed the additional vulnerability of migrants, refugees, asylum seekers and stateless people. In the absence of state protection, and with serious restrictions on their rights, many are now subject to harassment, arbitrary arrests and mass deportations.

We have seen a rise in discriminatory and xenophobic attitudes affecting Asians and people of Asian descent, which often lead to violence.  Even before the pandemic, we were witnessing a worldwide increase in negative stereotypes against certain groups.

Migrants and other groups facing racial discrimination are often the scapegoats when there are problems, particularly in relation to housing and employment shortages.

The pandemic has also further exacerbated the vulnerable situation of indigenous peoples’ communities, often located in remote regions and with limited access to health care and medical support.

This crisis is having disproportionate impact on women, particularly on women facing intersecting forms of discrimination due to gender, race and ethnicity. They are subject to an excessive burden of unpaid work, increased poverty, job insecurity and limited access to public services. Women have also been on the frontlines of response to the health crisis and are more exposed to infection.

Despite overwhelming evidence, there is a lack of disaggregated data on how the COVID-19 pandemic has been affecting victims of racial discrimination. Data on the rate of infection is not either available or recorded in many countries. That means that the disparities and human rights violations victims face are often underestimated -- or even denied.

Against the backdrop of this devastating human tragedy, in the framework of the implementation of Human Rights Council resolution 43/1, my Office continues to receive reports of police brutality and racism against people of African descent, underscoring the gravity of the situation. As I told the Human Rights Council in September, the extent to which these human rights violations go unpunished is a source of serious concern.

Yet, we have also seen widespread support for victims of police violence and protests all over the world demanding justice and equality.

Colleagues,

Greater equality is not only an ethical obligation. It is a pre-requisite for overcoming these crises. It is a requirement for us to recover from COVID-19 and build back better from the pandemic.

In this context, the 20th anniversary of the Durban Declaration and Programme of Action, together with the International Decade for People of African descent and the 2030 Agenda, provide us with the opportunity to place racial equality and equity at the centre of global and national agendas.

It is the occasion for all of us to set priorities and future actions, a chance to renew and strengthen commitments to implementing the Durban Declaration and Programme of Action, and design adequate responses to fight racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance.

I wish you fruitful discussions.

Thank you.