

**Opening address by  
Anwar Kemal  
Chair of the Committee on the Elimination  
of Racial Discrimination**

**Day of thematic discussion  
Racial discrimination against people of African Descent**

**Seventy-eighth session  
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High Commissioner for Human Rights, H.E. Madame Navi Pillay,  
Excellencies, Distinguished Members of the Committee  
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Today we celebrate and honour the contributions of people of African descent to the cause of freedom and equal rights for all peoples and races. The main purpose in holding this thematic discussion, as part of the United Nations' International Year on people of African descent, is to carry forward to new heights the mission that the Committee on Racial Discrimination embarked upon four decades ago. At that time, the most glaring form of racial discrimination prevailed in Southern Africa – South Africa to be precise.

In spite of universal, international condemnation, the minority regime in Pretoria, which also controlled Namibia, practised racial discrimination of the most odious kind against the African majority and all those perceived to be 'non-white'. That South Africa managed an orderly transition from such an ignoble past is testimony to the emptiness of the supposed distinctions on which the apartheid regime was premised. Leading members of the African community in South Africa emerged from long spells of harsh imprisonment under the apartheid regime to preach the message of reconciliation, not vengeance. This shows that sustainable human interaction can only occur in societies where all human beings are entitled to the same rights and accorded equal protection against discrimination. In South Africa's transformation, the iconic figure of Nelson Mandela remains a bright beacon in our quest to eliminate all forms of racial discrimination in the world.

While the adoption of the Convention and the subsequent establishment of CERD may have had a lot to do with events in South Africa, the downfall of apartheid has not translated into a global multi-racial society. Even though it may no longer be fashionable to expressly discriminate against others on the basis of their race, racial discrimination persists in the world today. Sometimes it is flagrant as in sport stadiums and restaurants and other public places, but often it is subtle, even insidious, because it results in denial

of equal rights and opportunities to different races. Throughout history, people of African descent have borne a disproportionate impact of the racial discrimination through greater joblessness, physical insecurity, inadequate housing and healthcare, lower life-expectancy, and many other disadvantages.

Madame High Commissioner and Colleagues, while inhuman greed lay at the root of the Transatlantic Slave Trade, it was justified on grounds of a supposed inferiority of people of African descent. Colonial rule in Africa also brought with it significant racial oppression and racial segregation. Yet the people of African descent have contributed meaningfully to the development of all societies in which they have lived.

In contrast to the situation in South Africa during much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the free and impartial election to the presidency of the world's most powerful nation by a man of African descent, gives hope to those who yearn for a future where racial discrimination will be consigned to history books and museums. 'Yes we can' was a refrain popularised by the Barack Obama presidential campaign and today I can repeat the same motto 'Yes we can' to define our determination through concerted action to eliminate all forms of racial discrimination.

As we engage in our thematic discussion today, let us take a moment to reflect on the African philosophical ethic of *Ubuntu*. In its most fundamental sense *Ubuntu* represents personhood, humanity and humanness. It describes group solidarity where such solidarity is crucial for the survival and advancement of society. *Ubuntu* finds its cardinal embodiment in the Zulu maxim '*umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*' meaning a person can only be a person through others or literally 'I am because we are'. In reflecting on the predicament of people of African descent in the world, perhaps a little more *Ubuntu*, or *Harambee*, that is "Togetherness" as it is known in Swahili, amongst the various peoples of the world as well as Afro-descendants would be helpful. The "Togetherness" philosophy, which is widely prevalent all over Africa, venerates solidarity, compassion, respect, human dignity and general humanness. These values are all central to the elimination of racial discrimination in all its forms. If we treat each other with *Ubuntu*,

there will be no room for racial discrimination or other forms of prejudices. On the occasion of a thematic discussion on peoples of African descent, why not adopt an African philosophical ethic as offering hope in combating racial discrimination?

Thank you.