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**Opening address by
Navanethem Pillay
High Commissioner for Human Rights
Day of thematic discussion on racial discrimination against people of
African descent**



**Seventy-eighth session of the Committee on the Elimination
of Racial Discrimination**

**7 March 2011
Palais des Nations, Geneva**

Excellencies,
Distinguished Members of the Committee,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am pleased to open the day of the thematic discussion on racial discrimination against people of African descent. I am particularly happy that this event has attracted experts from different international human rights mechanisms in the United Nations system, regional offices and specialized agencies of the UN, States representatives and civil society partners.

For more than four decades, the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination has played a pivotal role in the fight against racial discrimination. This was duly acknowledged both during the Durban Conference as well as the Durban Review Conference.

In 2009, the United Nations General Assembly proclaimed the year beginning on 1 January 2011, the International Year for People of African Descent. I recall that since 1959, the United Nations has designated International years to draw attention to major issues and encourage international action to address concerns of particular importance to the world.

This International Year offers Member States, civil society and all other stakeholders an opportunity to strengthen national actions and regional and international cooperation for the benefit of people of African descent in relation to their full enjoyment of economic, social, cultural, civil and political rights. It will also provide a platform to bolster their participation and integration in all aspects of society, and promote greater understanding and respect for their diverse heritage and culture. These goals were highlighted by the Secretary General when he launched the International Year on 10 December 2010. With today's thematic discussion, the Committee on the Elimination of

Racial Discrimination responded to that call and provided an early contribution to the success of the International Year.

Let me spell out that the International Year specifically aims at:

- Recognising the role of people of African descent in global development and the construction of the societies they are part of;
- Achieving justice for current and past acts that have created or perpetuated discrimination;
- Developing strategies that ensure equality and eliminate discrimination against people of African descent who continue to suffer discrimination.

Such action is imperative in the face of persisting aspects of the transatlantic slave trade's abhorrent legacy which continue to affect the lives of people of African descent. In many societies they are often subjected to significantly unequal and unfavourable conditions and experience racism, poverty and exclusion, that is, structural discrimination against them.

They continue to face challenges in the realisation of their human rights, including their right to quality education and training, the right to access to public health and medical services, the right to work and to representation in public office. These situations are often more dire for and affect more widely women, youth, children and migrants.

As you embark on today's discussion I would like to recall that the Durban Declaration affirms the importance and necessity of ensuring the full participation of people of African descent in the social, economic and political spheres and to facilitate their full participation at all levels of decision-making. It is incumbent upon all Member States to follow the recommendations of the Durban Conference and also to ensure respect for the provisions of the various human rights treaties in order to make tangible progress in the fight against racial discrimination.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am certain that today's discussions, your participation, and your insights will contribute to the development of additional steps and initiatives to further the objectives of the International Year. I call upon States, as well as civil society, to participate fully and constructively. I invite you, as you listen to the various speakers, to contribute to the solutions that will have an impact on people of African descent all over the world.

In concluding, I would like to inform you that, in addition to today's event, my Office is carrying out a series of coordinated activities to mark the International Year, including the holding of relevant side events during the Human Rights Council sessions and the creation of a fellowship programme for young people of African descent.

I wish you a very fruitful discussion and look forward to the results of your deliberations. Thank you.