

**Opening address at the 30th session of the
Working Group of Experts on People of African Descent
Craig Mokhiber, Director, New York Office
of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, 23 May 2022**

Distinguished experts, ladies and gentlemen,

It is a pleasure to join you for the opening of the 30th Session of the Working Group of Experts on People of African Descent,

And it is especially nice to welcome you for the first session of the Working Group to be held here New York.

The Working Group's decision to convene public meetings outside of Geneva will allow it to reach more people, to enhance its visibility, and to better catalyse change.

And I think it is fitting that you bring this session to New York today.

Because it was here, 75 years ago, in 1947, that WEB Dubois brought his appeal to these halls.

His call was simple: people of African descent were human beings, with human rights.

And those rights were being violated every day, in every sphere, and with impunity.

Dubois called on the UN to be true to its Charter and to challenge the scourge of racism, racial discrimination and white supremacy that had plagued his people and his country since its birth.

He appealed to the nations of the world for solidarity, and he demanded action from the UN to hold the US accountable for the injustice that framed the everyday reality of African Americans. He argued:

“Our treatment in America is not merely an internal question of the United States. It is a basic problem of humanity; of democracy; of discrimination

because of race and color; and as such it demands your attention and action. No nation is so great that the world can afford to let it continue to be deliberately unjust, cruel and unfair toward its own citizens.”

Two decades later, Dubois would be followed to this building by other leaders bringing much the same message.

Leaders like Martin Luther King Jr., Malcolm X, Ralph Abernathy, and others.

They would argue that the struggles of the African American people were not merely local “civil rights” struggles, as they had been labelled in the US,

but rather they were universal human rights struggles,

the very business of the United Nations, of its Charter, and of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Sadly, the struggle that defined their lives’ work is yet to be won.

Institutionalized, structural racism, white supremacy, racial discrimination, racist violence, racialized police abuse,

the denial of economic and social rights, of the fair administration of justice, of equality, and of dignity itself –

these have not gone away.

Just nine days ago, only a few hundred miles from here, an avowed white supremacist, heavily armed and fuelled by racism and far-right conspiracy theories,

shot thirteen people in a grocery in Buffalo, killing ten of them and injuring three others.

And no isolated incident was this, but rather just the latest horrific thump in a long drum beat of racist violence extending back even before the founding of the country to the colonialization of these lands

I recalled an earlier time, some 40 years ago, when I myself was living in Buffalo, when another racist murderer, dubbed the “22 Calibre Killer”, terrorized the same community for months,

hunting and shooting black men because, in his words, he “had to kill black people.”

19 men would be attacked before he was finally captured.

So much time has passed. And yet, so little has changed.

Indeed, this session also takes place on the second anniversary of the murder of George Floyd,

who was tortured to death on a busy street in broad daylight and under the glare of mobile phone cameras by a police on 25 May 2020,

demonstrating the arrogance of power seeded by long-term impunity

and sparking global anti-racism protests.

I know the Working Group is rightly planning an event on Wednesday to commemorate Mr. Floyd and the movement that he inspired.

I am also aware that the Working Group intends to discuss the theme “Children of African Descent”

A critical subject of focus in the face of the daily struggle people of African descent to protect the human rights of their children and to provide a safe and secure future for them.

One in which children can grow without fear or racial discrimination, to reach their full potential and to enjoy all their human rights.

Because, today, from an early age, children of African descent are exposed to the harsh realities of racism and racial discrimination.

And structural racism against children of African descent manifests itself in myriad ways and is a global concern.

The education they receive often does not adequately reflect the history of people of African descent, or their current realities,

The horrors of slavery and institutionalized discrimination, the racism and persecution to which they have been subjected,

the perseverance and heroism they exhibited, their contributions to politics, art, science, medicine, music, and literature.

Histories are white-washed and distorted. The African experience erased.

And the risks to these children are further compounded by the tendency of young people in minority communities to be channelled toward incarceration

because of a combination of systemic deprivation and discrimination, and increasingly harsh school, municipal, and police policies-

--commonly known in the US as the "school to prison pipeline".

Ultimately, racial discrimination pervades every aspect of their lives, including in education, housing, healthcare, the administration of justice, and family life.

And we know that these experiences are also rooted in the systemic nature of racism and racial discrimination, and the failure to acknowledge, remedy and redress the legacy of slavery, colonialism, Jim Crow, and racial segregation.

As the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination has rightly pointed out, it is necessary to "adopt special measures to ensure equality in the exercise of their rights, in particular corresponding to the areas that most affect the lives of children"

And to "[u]ndertake initiatives specifically aimed at protecting the special rights of the girl child and the rights of boys in vulnerable situations, especially due to "the particular vulnerability of children of African descent, which may lead to the

transmission of poverty from generation to generation, and the inequality affecting people of African descent”.

Similarly, the Resolution on the International Decade for People of African Descent, adopted by the General Assembly in 2014 calls upon States to

take all necessary measures to give effect to the right of people of African descent, particularly children and young people,

to free primary education and access to all levels and forms of quality public education without discrimination.

It also calls upon States to take measures to ensure that public and private education systems do not discriminate against or exclude children of African descent,

and that they are protected from direct or indirect discrimination, negative stereotyping, stigmatization and violence from peers or teachers;

to this end, training and sensitization are to be provided to teachers and measures should be taken to increase the number of teachers of African descent working in educational institutions.

But these young people are *not* mere victims. Rather, they are our hope.

Because we know that the global anti-racism movement that has inspired us all and that shook the world in 2020 was predominantly led by young people,

who made clear to all their demands for an end to racial injustice and for the total eradication of the stain of racism from our societies.

Of course, the UN’s anti-racism architecture has been further strengthened with the establishment, at long last, of the Permanent Forum of People of African Descent,

and of the Independent Expert Mechanism to Advance Racial Justice and Equality in Law Enforcement.

Even as our own office (OHCHR) has worked to strengthen our capacity to deal with racial discrimination and address systemic racism.

And the Durban (DDPA) follow-up mechanisms are continuing their essential work, in the face of continuing anti-Durban campaigns of misinformation, distortion, and political obstruction by actors opposed to our bold anti-racist vision.

Of course, the emergence of this impressive collection of international mechanisms, while a welcome development,

also means that enhanced and effective coordination among them is more essential than ever, as has been emphasized by the GA in its latest resolution on the subject.

Distinguished experts, these are difficult times for our collective mission of racial justice, racial equality, and human rights for all.

White supremacy, neo-fascism, racism, xenophobia, and far-right ideologies are on the march again. Apartheid is back. And so is Naziism.

Your work has never been more important.

And so you have our solidarity, and our full support.

Precisely because black lives matter, this working group matters.

And the long-deferred call to the UN from Dubois and King, from Malcolm and Abernathy, and from the families of George Floyd and of those taken from us in Buffalo, also matters.

We wish you success in your deliberations, and I thank you.
