

**50th anniversary of the Adoption of the International Convention on the Elimination of All
Forms of Racial Discrimination
“ICERD - Fifty years of fighting racial discrimination - looking back and moving forward”**

**Palais des Nations, Room XX
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Statement by Volker Türk, Assistant High Commissioner for Protection

Mr. Chairperson, Committee Members, Distinguished Delegates, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am pleased to join you here today to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the adoption of the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD), a core instrument for the protection of the most vulnerable. UNHCR has a special interest in and commitment to reducing racism and xenophobia.

Racism and xenophobia diminish us all, but the discrimination and intolerance to which they give rise do not affect us equally. Racial discrimination and related intolerance are common causes of displacement and can compromise the protections afforded to asylum-seekers, refugees, and internally displaced people. Stateless persons are also often affected, as discrimination on the basis of ethnicity, race, religion, or language is a common and recurrent cause of statelessness. The majority of the world’s 10 million stateless people belong to minority groups, and at least twenty countries maintain nationality laws which deny or permit the withdrawal of nationality on the grounds of ethnicity, race, or religion.

With an unprecedented 60 million persons forcibly displaced around the world today, we must ensure that racism and xenophobia do not further worsen their already precarious situations. Increasing concerns over security and integration capacity can exacerbate xenophobia and create a climate of fear. This is further fueled by irresponsible media reporting and a lack of political and moral leadership. We have lately witnessed a proliferation of xenophobic narratives, hate speech, fear-mongering, and inflammatory statements directed against refugees at all levels of society. This has not only threatened to undermine the institution of asylum, but also at times has even led to violence against refugees.

Chairperson,

In this context of re-surg-ing racism, xenophobia, and political populism, at the human level we must find ways to foster greater empathy and support for persons who have been compelled to flee their homes. In this direction, I have been heartened in these recent months to hear more loudly the voices of the once largely silent majority that is now starting to speak up against intolerance towards refugees. There have been media reports and human interest stories that have countered the vitriolic rhetoric that has gained so much traction as of late. We have been hearing more and more about individuals and communities expressing their solidarity and opening their arms to receive people fleeing persecution and conflict. Now is the time to shine the spotlight on these many innovative and initiatives to assist refugees, and to galvanise further commitment and action by sharing these stories more widely.

At the institutional level, the ICERD’s protective role is more critical than ever in addressing elimination of racial discrimination, promoting understanding, outlawing hate speech, and criminalising membership in racist organisations. Parties to the ICERD are obliged to review and amend their laws and policies to ensure that they do not discriminate on the basis of race, and to guarantee the right of everyone to equality before the law regardless of race, colour, or national or ethnic origin. The near-universal acceptance by the

international community of the ICERD is a testament to its impact. Most parties to the ICERD have also accepted its individual complaint mechanism, and many have even gone further to adopt legislation outlawing racial discrimination in the workplace or in the provision of services, such as housing and education.

There is still more that we can do to act in the spirit of the Convention. The outcome document of the Durban Review Conference of 2009 is a good starting point. We look forward to the time when it will be fully implemented, including the parts explicitly relating to asylum-seekers, refugees, and internally displaced people, as well as to arbitrary deprivation of nationality. States can engage in this process by training law enforcement, immigration, and border officials with a view to sensitising them to racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia, and related intolerance. They can counter xenophobic attitudes and negative stereotypes directed against non-citizens by politicians, law enforcement, immigration officials, and the media, and grant refugees non-discriminatory access to services. They can also refrain from taking measures that would arbitrarily deprive persons of their nationality or render them stateless.

For its part, UNHCR incorporates anti-xenophobia activities into its operations worldwide. In the context of the reintegration of refugees in their countries of origin, we are engaged in promoting reconciliation and peaceful co-existence. At the same time, we have broadened the base of countries willing to resettle refugees who are unable to remain in their host countries or return to their home countries in safety. We have also increased our anti-xenophobia efforts in many of our operations around the world in partnership with civil society and regional actors. This year, the High Commissioner's Dialogue on Protection Challenges will consider the root causes of displacement, in which racism and xenophobia are often implicated, with a view to catalysing action to address them.

In conclusion,

We are living in a time where the proliferation of violent conflicts around the world has resulted in escalating rates of displacement, growing humanitarian needs, and increasingly complex protection environments. Now more than ever, a renewed, all-out effort is necessary to ensure that the protection of displaced people remains life-saving, non-political, and fundamentally humanitarian. Human rights, with non-discrimination as a core principle, are inalienable entitlements – not a privilege. We must join efforts to tackle the root causes of all forms of intolerance, in recognition of the connections that racism and xenophobia can have to the displacement and plight of persons in need of safety from violence and persecution today.

Thank you.