

Data on People of African Descent in Asia¹

by

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If I may be adventurous with my language, data is sexy. Data is cool. Data is hip. As some might recall from their favorite subject mathematics, there is no reason to tune out when numbers start to be discussed. In fact, as I will explain, to realize the goals of the Durban Declaration Program of Action, and those of the International Decade for People of African Descent, in a way, data is everything. Data is evidence. And the Working Group is an evidence based human rights mechanism. Certainly, in Asia, we need data and it must be forthcoming.

The Working Group sent out a call for data on people of African descent all over the world including Asia for our data mapping project. Sadly, there were no responses from Asian Member States. I would like Asian Member States to reconsider and to provide the data sought. If I may be so bold, it is a matter of fact that there are people of African descent in Asia.

Some Asian countries might think that there are no people of African descent within their jurisdiction, or if there are, they are only a few. Accordingly, no Member State in Asia has yet invited the Working Group for a country visit. I humbly request that the situation be viewed from a new perspective. In different waves of migration, people of African Descent are in your countries. They are in your schools as professors or students. They are in your labor markets as expats or workers. They are the health professionals in your hospitals. They are in your sports teams. Their roles in your societies are as rich and varied as the cultures of their ancestry.

In the Indian Ocean world, people of African descent are the Siddis who have existed as the lowest caste living in generation upon generation of poverty. In Japan, South Korea, Philippines, and other places with US military facilities, they are the off spring of African American service men and Asian mothers, the stigmatized racially diverse children of prostitutes, viewed as the impure least of the least. In China and Malaysia, they are the informal workers in an irregular immigration situation with little or no

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prospects of becoming citizens, much less realizing the promise of the better life that comes with citizenship.

If people of African descent turn up in numbers in the thousands which you might consider rather few, the numbers are still immensely valuable to us. These numbers are thinking numbers. Each person of African descent has infinite value. We would like to know them, whatever the numbers say. Furthermore, we would like to learn about the conditions in which they live.

There are some bright spots in Asia. Faces of people of African descent in their success serve to mediate between people of African descent and Asian societies. In Japan, the head of one Japanese university is of African descent. People of African descent have made contributions to sciences, politics, philosophy and the arts. Many Asian countries also have local sports heroes who are of African descent. The Working Group calls for information on these kinds of stories too.

Data on people of African descent in Asia is sorely lacking in Asia. In the census of Member States in Asia, you might find figures on African tourists, refugees and other groups of foreigners. But as nationals of African descent in Asian countries, the numbers are simply unavailable. This situation is unfortunate. People of African descent are not being counted in spite of their presence in the region for historical reasons as well as on account of a contemporary influx of migrants and asylum seekers. I would love to be proven wrong in this regard. I would be happy to receive information to the contrary.

At this point, I would like to share with you some data gathered through desk research by the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights. The input on China stated:

Public data could not be located on total number of people of African descent in China, however estimates for the city of Guangzhou in southern China range from 100,000 to 20,000. The city is considered the New York of China and is not reflective of the rest of the country. However, the population is in decline due to economic reasons.

<https://www.scmp.com/news/china/society/article/2144823/after-boom-fortunes-turn-chinas-little-africa-opportunity-awaits>

16,000 permanent residents from Africa live in Guangzhou, southern China
<https://www.scmp.com/news/china/society/article/2144823/after-boom-fortunes-turn-chinas-little-africa-opportunity-awaits>

Meanwhile, the data on India was:

There are an estimated 20,000 Indian citizens of African descent.

<http://www.bbc.com/travel/story/20160801-indias-forgotten-jungle-dwellers>

Chiefly located in the states of Karnataka, Maharashtra and Gujarat, and the city of Hyderabad <http://www.bbc.com/travel/story/20160801-indias-forgotten-jungle-dwellers>

Attacks on people of African descent, mostly students, have continued at a staggering pace in India. India is failing to provide the adequate security for people of African descent.

<https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/delhi/delhi-mob-attacks-africans-alleges-theyd-eaten-a-boy/articleshow/66779119.cms>

Youth of African descent have been the primary victims of racial attacks as they are the ones obtaining student visas.

<https://www.amnesty.nl/actueel/india-racist-hate-crimes-against-black-african-students-must-end>

Finally, the input on Bahrain was:

Approximately 23,083* (figure largely determined utilizing CIA World Factbook)

Information was also received from civil society on West Papuans who consider themselves of African descent. With their curly hair and dark skin, they are discriminated against by Indonesians who have occupied West Papua, following a turn over from the Netherlands.

However seemingly big or small the population of people of African descent in Asian States, the constant is the racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance that people of African descent face. For the racial discrimination to be adequately addressed, we must have a clear picture of what is going on. And the picture, I stress, is one of numbers.

If I may, data on people of African descent is crucial to inform policies affecting them. Current legal frameworks in Asia fail to consider people of African descent as a specific victim group. Their assimilation into Asian societies overlooks their unique vulnerability and fails to take into account the scourge of racism, racial discrimination,

xenophobia and related intolerance that they face. Much less is there recognition of their historical and contemporary contributions to Asian societies.

People of African descent are all around in Asia. In the Indian peninsula and the Arab world, the presence of people of African descent is to a considerable extent explained by historical reasons. A trade in enslaved Africans has been documented as having traversed this part of the world. Wars were fought in different parts of Asia with Africans as warriors and military leaders, People of African descent have left a stamp of the African presence that continues today.

There must be an accounting on people of African descent and the accounting must be comprehensive. The African identity in Asia must be revealed and fully acknowledged. Asian countries must include in their census the option for people of African descent in Asia to self-identify as having African ancestry including those of African descent beyond the first generation up to the second and third generations and so on.

We would like to probe more deeply and learn how well people of African descent perform in Asian schools. If they drop out, we would appreciate information on the reasons why. Do people of African descent have regular, decent jobs? What is their income? How many of them live in poverty? If they do, how poor are they? What is the nature of their housing? Do they eat safe and healthy foods? Do they have access to affordable health care? Do people of African descent have social security? How about water, electricity and roads? Are there formal ways to safeguard and preserve their African cultures? Do oversight mechanisms exist to safeguard the basic human rights of people of African descent?

Are the best interests of children of African descent served in Asian countries? Do Asian governments exert all efforts to keep families of African descent together? Are there adequate safeguards against separation of children of African descent from their parents? Does effective administrative and judicial oversight exist to protect the rights of children of African descent?

How many people of African descent come into conflict with the law? In prison, what is the proportion between them and the rest of society? For those detained, how many of them are in solitary confinement or experience torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment? Are they able to avail of legal remedies to question the lawfulness of their arrest and detention? Is there a right to legal counsel and to an interpreter? Do they have fair trial rights? Are those who violate their rights held accountable?

To what extent is there data on hate speech and violence against people of African descent? What do we know about the availability of and resort to mechanisms for redress? How many persons responsible for hate crimes against people of African descent are brought to justice? Are there credible, independent investigations into crimes against people of African descent, whether committed by State agents or civilians?

Do people of African descent enjoy freedom of expression? Do they have a right to information? Are they able to choose and exercise their religion? Do they have freedom of movement and the right to choose their abode? Can they form associations and peacefully assemble? Are there institutions that exist to guarantee the meaningful and effective exercise of these rights?

To what extent are people of African descent integrated politically in Asia? Are people of African descent able to exercise their political rights in Asian countries? Do they have the right to vote? Are they able to participate in public life? What pathways do migrants and refugees of people of African descent have toward a national identity card and citizenship, with a view to the full enjoyment of their political rights?

Are there safeguards against negative stereotypes of people of African descent? Elsewhere, I have written about examples of negative stereotypes in Asian culture, in books, plays, and social and other media, and the dangers that they pose. These stereotypes perpetuate misconceptions about people of African descent. Misinformation about them poses obstacles to their social, political and economic inclusion and integration and threatens the full enjoyment of their human rights.

Is there sufficient documentation of the history of people of African descent in Asia? Where appropriate, is there adequate coverage of this history in school books? For countries involved historically in the trade in enslaved Africans, are there memorials set up to remember the atrocities of the past? What forms of recognition of African contributions to Asian societies exist and what is their nature and scope?

The Durban Declaration Program of Action and International Decade for People of African Descent Program of Activities provide a rich platform for conversation on the human rights of people of African descent, not just for some regions of the world, but for all. Asian countries must develop reasoned and reflective responses to the challenges of the Durban and Decade, to end racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance against people of African descent.

Halfway through the International Decade for People of African Descent, it is hoped that Asia will desire to take the lead to jump start the implementation of its program

of activities. Asians thus far are not known to have taken any steps for the Decade. Let that fact change. Let Asia be known for something else in so far as the Decade is concerned. Let the Asian region want to be at the forefront of putting an end to the invisibility of people of African descent in this part of the world. Asian governments must afford people of African descent access to mechanisms for reparatory justice. What is more, Asia must be a bright light for the development of people of African descent.

Invite the Working Group to a country visit. Let the Working Group see first hand what is happening on the ground.

Data is of absolute necessity to take appropriate action against racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance against people of African descent. If the definite contours of the challenges are unknown, tailor fit solutions cannot be formulated. Harrowing inter-generational poverty, for instance, if its nature and scope escapes us, runs the risk of continuing unabated.

As part of an international family, I have no doubt Asian societies care profoundly about their brothers and sisters in the richly diverse global community. Increasingly, Asians are realizing that their lives and the lives of people of African descent are intimately bound. In this paper, I have endeavored in broad strokes to offer the beginnings of a roadmap to strengthen the ties that make Asians and people of African descent and Africans one. To Asian Member States, I stress: Begin to count the people of African descent. Collect data about them and the extent to which they enjoy their civil and political rights, as well their economic, social and cultural rights. Then be a beacon of data driven initiatives, laws and policies that to the fullest extent recognize and give effect to recognition, justice and development for people of African descent.