**The Regional Meeting for the Middle East on the International Decade for People of African Descent 30 October to 1 November 2022 in Room XXI, PDN, Geneva**

Closing remarks

Peggy Hicks, Director of Thematic Engagement, Special Procedures and Right to Development Division

Tuesday 1 November 2022, from 3pm to 4pm

Excellencies,

Colleagues and Friends,

On behalf of the High Commissioner for Human Rights and the Deputy High Commissioner for Human Rights, as well as our all Office I want to thank you for your meaningful engagement and valuable contributions to this important meeting that addressed the situation of the Africans and people of African descent in the Middle East. As representatives of Member States, regional organizations, United Nations agencies, national human rights institutions and civil society, in particular of communities of African descent, as well as experts and academics you have brought different voices to the discussions and given us an immensely rich conversation, and I think that remarks of the Rapporteur have shown that even to those who weren’t fortunate enough to be able to follow the deliberations.

This is the fourth in a series of regional meetings on the International Decade for People of African Descent, and we are glad that, once again, it brings together all relevant stakeholders to address “Recognition, Justice, and Development” - the three pillars of the Decade.

The Middle East has we have heard is known for its rich diversity of nations, religions, traditions, races, ethnicities, cultures, and languages. The past two days of intense discussions and exchanges have highlighted how Africans and people of African descent have contributed to this diversity and enriched this region over the centuries in different ways and continue to do so today. Difficult issues persist, as we have heard, in particular the legacies of enslavement and the slave trade and contemporary challenges faced by people of African descent in the enjoyment of their human rights in the region. We have had an opportunity to listen to them and to the challenges they face. People of African descent in the region, like in other parts of the world, suffer from racism, marginalization and discrimination in various areas of life, including in political representation and in the right to development. As acknowledged by Governments of the World at the Durban conference in 2001, “no country is free from racism”.

Importantly, our discussions have also shown ways to build better, fairer and less discriminatory societies. Excellent panellists and meeting participants have discussed the measures, initiatives and practices undertaken in different countries of the region to combat racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance. And areas for further cooperation have been identified.

Since the Durban Declaration and Programme of Action and the birth of the Decade in 2015, global efforts have been enhanced to combat and prevent racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance. Achievements in the implementation of the Programme of activities of the Decade worldwide include legislative measures; the adoption of national action plans against discrimination; the establishment of national monitoring and complaint mechanisms; strengthened capacity-building; data collection and research; community engagement and awareness-raising; and educational and outreach activities in promoting the Decade.

We must build on these promising examples to strengthen social cohesion and advance justice and equality for every human being.

There are, as has been said, two years remaining in the Decade. We need to use these two years to accelerate progress to achieve all we can within those two years, recognising, as the Rapportuer has said, that the work will certainly not stop at the end of those two years. I would like to outline some of the areas of work where meaningful achievements can still be made, and must be made, in the region within the next two years.

* First and foremost, in my perspective, we need to emphasize and ensure that measures are taken to ensure meaningful participation and inclusion of people of African descent in decision-making processes affecting them. People’s concerns should be heard and acted upon. That is a matter not just of rights but of effectiveness. We know that we will find effective solutions, sustainable solutions, only when those voices are not just present but respected within this discussion.
* Second, we need to adopt national anti-discrimination laws to bring these fully in line with international human rights standards and norms, in particular with obligations under the International Covenant on the Elimination of all forms of Racial Discrimination, ICERD. And in cases where such laws already exist, to review them to ensure that they are fully in line with those standards.
* We need to establish and strengthen national human rights institutions that are independent from the State and are equipped with adequate resources to carry out their mandate to monitor, report and advise national authorities on the human rights situation, and to investigate human rights violations and support victims in this area. We heard from the Rapporteur how that is an area that has been flagged and where there are gaps that need to be addressed
* And, fourth, we need to raise awareness through information, research, and education measures with a view to restoring the dignity of people of African descent. Ensure that textbooks and other educational materials reflect historical facts accurately, in particular slavery, the slave trade, the transatlantic slave trade and colonialism, to avoid stereotypes and the distortion or falsification of historical facts.
* In all of these efforts, we need to strengthen cooperation and collaboration among States and other institutions in the region, as well as with United Nations agencies, including our own, so that we will work together to strengthen all of these efforts around concrete projects and initiatives.

Finally, I want to reiterate the call made in the Transformative Agenda, steadily reverse cultures of denial, to dismantle systemic racism where it is identified and to accelerate our pace of action; we need to end impunity for human rights violations by law enforcement officials and close trust deficits in that regard; to ensure that the voices of people of African descent and those who stand up against racism are heard and their concerns acted upon; and finally to confront the legacies we have discussed, including through accountability and redress.

I look forward to seeing the outcome of our constructive dialogues over last two days applied on the ground. I encourage States and civil society to work together towards a more inclusive and equal agenda and to enhance the situation of the People of African Descent.

My Office and my colleagues here, whom I thank for all their efforts in this regard, stand ready to support member states, civil society and relevant stakeholders in implementing these plans and agendas.

Thank you again for all your efforts.