**Regional Meeting for the Middle East on the International Decade for People of African Descent**

**Summary statement of the Rapporteur, Ms. Barbara Reynolds (Vice-Chair of the WGEPAD)**

**Closing session**

**Tuesday 1 November, 3pm**

Excellencies,

Colleagues, Friends, People of African Descent,

It has been an honour to be the Rapporteur of this Regional meeting for the Middle East on the Decade. The past two days have been truly enriching. I thank all the distinguished panellists for their enlightening presentations. I also thank the representatives of States and all meeting participants for the fruitful and positive exchange and discussion. As a few of you have pointed out, it would have been helpful to have this regional meeting at the beginning of the decade. The progress made yesterday and today, in many ways, have helped us all to become current on the issues of people of African descent in this region, and for that we are grateful. Now, we look to the next steps, acknowledging that what happens in the Middle East and North Africa is important not just for the region and its people of African descent, but for people African descent around the world, for Africa and, of course, for the world.

Before I sum up, I want to remind us that it is incumbent upon all of us to acknowledge the progress made, as exemplified by the information shared by several states including Tunisia and the United Arab Emirates, without overlooking historical and current injustices; and that all voices are welcome, all experiences are valid and that we must first call out wrongs as a basis for moving forward.

The contributions of the panellists and the ensuing discussion **highlighted the following:**

* The trans-Saharan and trans-Atlantic slave trade, the enslavement of Africans, colonialism and post-Independence policies and practices were major factors in and manifestations of anti-Black racism and racial discrimination, and that the consequences of these phenomena continue to affect the civil, political, economic, cultural and collective rights of Africans and people of African descent in the region. Panellists noted that racial discrimination, embedded in the structures and psyche of peoples of the region persist as barriers to the full realisation of their rights.
* Panellists underscored the fact that the lack of full and adequate data and statistics remain a challenge. The inclusion, analysis, and dissemination of ethno-racial data in all aspects of civil, political, economic, social and cultural dimensions in the region are indispensable to adequate legislation, policy, planning and programmes for the recognition, visibility, and the reversal of the erasure of Africans and people of African descent, in the region.
* Panellists acknowledged that there is increased recognition that racism and racial discrimination have caused the marginalization of people of African descent in many aspects of public life outside of sports and the arts, and this invisibility continues to perpetuate inaccuracies about the contribution of Africans and people of African descent to every aspect of public life of the region. To the contrary, many people of African descent and Africans continue to be excluded, experience poverty disproportionately, and have inadequate access to justice, health, housing, education, employment, and economic development.
* Panellists stressed the impact of multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination on the most vulnerable, particularly women.
* Several panellists expressed concerns about the labour conditions of Africans and people of African descent in the region, and while I have not captured everything that the last set of speakers said, I do know that this is a concern particularly for migrant domestic workers, notably the sponsorship system known as “kafalah”.
* Panellists welcomed the International Decade for People of African Descent and underscored the full relevance and pertinence of the Durban Declaration and Programme of Action to tackle racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia, and related intolerance.
* The adoption of anti-discrimination laws and procedures was highlighted as a good practice for addressing racism and racial discrimination. For example, in Tunisia, the government adopted a comprehensive law that makes racist violence criminal and consolidates the country's efforts towards prevention, recognition, justice, and rehabilitation for victims. In Mauritania, in 2018, the National Assembly passed a law to fight discrimination and racism. It should be noted for the record that these are examples, and they are not exhaustive.

In the second panel, presenters were invited to discuss the pillar of “justice” of the programme of activities of the Decade, with a focus on acknowledging the past and highlighting the contributions of Africans and people of African descent, including formerly enslaved Africans, to the cultural, social and economic development of the region.

The panel expressed the view that the Middle East is the region of the world where the presence of people of African descent is the oldest, the most diversified and the most productive. People of African descent have positively impacted the culture and traditions of the countries where they live and continue to contribute to the cultural and economic growth of these countries. Yet, many in the region are unaware, and therefore are unable to recognise the historical contributions of Africans and people of African descent to the cultural, socio-economic and political development of the Middle East. Over the last few decades, however, scholars from the region have undertaken studies on the African presence in the Middle East, and we are grateful to have heard several of these scholars share their work today.I would like to say here that I echo the comments of one of the moderators that we have learnt much over the last two days, and that can only enrich our conceptualization of our work.

We learned that several taboos, prejudice and apprehension continue to discourage serious research and frank debate on the influence of Africans and people of African descent in the region. Regardless of this,

* Panellists reiterated that the history of enslavement of Africans is a fundamental part of the history of the region and continues to impact the present, and encouraged the integration of this history through educational curricula and “popular narratives”.
* Panellists posited that research on the specificities of people of African descent in the region should be carried out by historians from the region as, for example, exemplified through the work of the the Afro-Palestinian Community in the Old City of Jerusalem documenting and disseminating their contribution to all aspects of life in Jerusalem although people of African descent continue to experience limitations on their civil status, the consequential limitations on access to social services and socio-economic development, and compromisin of their legal civil identity.
* Panellists spoke of the need to fully embrace all different identities in the region, including the identity of people of African descent that was erased from the national identity in some contexts.

During the general debate that followed, it was reported that people of African descent are victims of “social racism” and racial prejudice who do not fully enjoy their civil and political rights; that they are not adequately represented in State institutions nor in decision making processes; that they often face repression for claiming their rights and have their demands ignored by government officials. It was also stated that the concerns of people of African descent were not addressed by regional organizations. The limited implementation of the laws and the lack of a legal framework that protect the rights of people of African descent in the region, therefore, remain a challenge. Several participants stressed that people of African descent from the region should unite, mobilize, coordinate, and act collectively to fight for their rights, to express their concerns and their lived reality without acceding to “victimhood” as a basis for a shared vision and action for the future.

In the third panel which focused on Development, speakers were invited to discuss opportunities and challenges that Africans and people of African descent face in the enjoyment of the right to development and economic and social rights in the region. Participants highlighted the following challenges:

* Africans and people of African descent continue to suffer from multiple and intersecting forms of anti-Black racism and discrimination in all areas of life.
  + the absence of reliable data on key indicators, including those related to nationality and refugee status, reinforces the invisibility of Africans and people of African descent, and therefore diminishes their access to development in many instances.
  + Panellists noted that in some instances, there is segregation in housing, health, and public services.
  + The specific challenges faced by women and girls, including sexual abuse, sexual assault, and sexual exploitation, institutional racism and differentiated access to employment, and the bullying of African children and children of African descent in schools in some countries were all noted.
  + The inadequacy of legislation and policies that govern labour migration from sub-Saharan Africa, with structural gaps in governmental oversight, inadequate labour market information systems, unfair labour practices (as for example those that exist in the kafalah system), and limited access to social protection measures continue to exacerbate the disadvantaged situation of Africans and people of African descent;
  + The forced labour or denial of fair and equitable work conditions and the right to association, as well as an escalation of conflict are of concern in some countries.
* Panellists emphasized that the international human rights framework, including the Declaration on the Right to Development, is key to addressing these challenges and to affirm and implement non-discrimination and equality of opportunity for development.
* Existing studies and initiatives that address these issues were cited, notably by the Expert Mechanism on the Right to Development, UNFPA’s strategy on “Supporting the advancement of rights and development of people of African descent”, ILO and the Working Group of Experts on people of African descent,– including the latter’s operational guidelines on the sustainable development goals for Member States, the UN system, international financial institutions, and for the information of other stakeholders.
* Panellists emphasised that all initiatives need to be relevant and meaningful, and that development must be grounded in the principle of self-determination and participation in decision-making by people of African descent, who have the right to maintain and strengthen their traditions and culture.
* Panellists reiterated that inequality and discrimination in the region are not only a domestic problem of States, but also a collective problem of the international community requiring international cooperation to address.
* The indispensable role of researchers, including and particularly African researchers and researchers of African descent, in academic and policy institutions, and the dissemination of such research and its integration into public discourse, public education and school curricula were reiterated by several speakers as indispensable.

Several good practices ,including initiatives undertaken in the region (for example in Iraq and in Qatar were shared:

* The enactment of laws, policies, strategies, and other interventions that address racism in operationalizing the right to development for enhanced implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals.
* The introduction of measures to hold public institutions and private organizations accountable for racial discrimination in all sectors.
* The proactive steps to address racial discrimination, anti-racism agendas and anti-discrimination action plans in national development.
* Civil society organisations which support women’s empowerment, cultural development and the preservation of African culture.
* States that support social integration of migrants of African descent through access to sexual and reproductive health and rights, gender-based violence prevention and care services.
* Labour reforms in some States to improve working and living conditions of migrant workers, for example, changes to the kafalah system; introduction of non-discriminatory minimum wage; building workers’ voice and representation. In this regard, I welcome the statement on ILO’s planned activities just made by the ILO representative in Qatar.
* Ensuring that the voices of people of African descent are heard in policy processes.
* Research in academic institutions around the world.

Among the specific recommendations emanating from the many statements and discussion were that:

1. Governments should accelerate action for racial justice and equality, including by taking concrete steps to implement the recommendations made by United Nations and regional human rights mechanisms and national human rights institutions. In this regard, we are reminded that governments are not just legislative bodies, but that they have the responsibility, structures, and authority to support positive norm-building by exemplifying and supporting changes in the perceptions of, attitudes to, and behaviours about Africans and people of African descent.
2. States should ratify international human rights treaties and ensure that national law are harmonised with international human rights standards, engaging with UN human rights organisations and mechanisms as necessary; strengthen national legal frameworks and human rights bodies for protection; and developing national action plans For enhancing capacities to expand the judicial space, to build the body of jurisprudence and a robust justice system to protect the rights of Africans and people of African descent in their jurisdictions.
3. States, and institutions across the region, should collect data that include ethno-racial indicators, in addition to gender and other demographic markers, to make visible African and Afro-descendant communities in their respective jurisdictions, and to guide the policy-making and targeted interventions in the economic, social, and cultural spheres. It was noted that the conduct of the national census and other national health, housing, education, and demographic surveys present excellent opportunities to include such indicators.
4. States should be encouraged to adopt robust anti-racism legislation, to implement the vision and programmes of action of the various treaty bodies and the recommendations of UN agencies and special procedures, noting the need for adequate legislation to govern the status of people of African descent who have been part of these countries for centuries as well as those now coming to the region, regardless of the modalities that brought them and their current status. In this regard, the role of the UN High Commission for Refugees, the International Office of Migration and the International Labour Organisation were cited as indispensable in informing such legislation, policies, and programmes.
5. States should take all necessary measures to eradicate taboos and racial prejudiceagainst Africans and people of African descent in their everyday lives, noting that many of these taboos are misinformed and that a fuller, public knowledge of Africa and African history would contribute to such positive attitudes and behaviours in the region.
6. UN agencies should support the establishment of an Arab observatory and the networking of academics, activists, artists, and athletes of African descent in the region to speak with one voice against racism and help countries having difficulties and challenges in addressing these issues.
7. States and UN agencies, including the Office for the High Commissioner for Human Rights, should increase the participation of persons of African descent from the region in global for a, enhancing their visibility and reinforcing the positive impact of such visibility in the region. In this regard, support should be given to affirmative measures for people of African descent to participate in all aspects of public life in states in the region, beyond the arts and sports, while recognising that country specific situations differ.
8. States should enact laws to fight anti-Black racism, as well as support discussion fora for scholars and civil society to raise awareness of the cultural diversity of the region, and implement cultural programmes to promote the valuable inputs of people of African descent to the region.
9. States should ensure institutional knowledge sharing on people of African descent from a gender perspective.
10. States should integrate the international legal framework on migration, refugees, and asylum seekers in the national activities of the Decade to have a full picture and address the issues properly.
11. States should integrate targeted and special measures to protect vulnerable individuals and communities, in the areas of health, housing, employment and work opportunities, as well as to address poverty, labour migration, and inequality and discrimination in education.In this regard, both states and international financial institutions are encouraged to establish grant mechanisms to fund organizations working on social equality and provide psycho-social support to Africans and people of African descent in the region.

In closing, I wish to echothe sentiments of those who reiterated that the end of the Decade in two years should not be the end of the conversation. To quote the UNFPA Deputy Regional Director, who quoted UNFPA Executive Director, “injustice and inequality are not fake, nor set in stone.” The history of Africa, Africans, and people of African descent is much more than enslavement and subjugation. On this position of strength, as posited by one speaker today and embraced by all, a shared vision, strategy, and focus can and should be forged in the region. To do so, State Parties, United Nations organisations and all interested parties, friends, and people of African descent themselves should adopt a posture of capacity building, training and investment in the rights of people of African descent, in their recognition, justice and development.

As I close my statement, I wish to express on behalf of the Working Group, which I represented today, my appreciation for joining you, and to again reiterate how much this has been meaningful to all of us with the express wish that the conversation continues.