**Regional Meeting for the Middle East on the**

**United Nations International Decade for People of African Descent**

**Statement by Nada Al-Nashif, UN Deputy High Commissioner for Human Rights**

Palais des Nations - Geneva, 31 October 2022

Excellencies, distinguished panellists,

Dear Colleagues and friends,

I am very pleased to open the fourth regional meeting on the International Decade for People of African Descent focusing on the significance for the Middle East of the Decade, which strives to promote the respect, protection and fulfilment of the human rights worldwide of people of African descent.

Africans and people of African descent have been part of the region’s history from the early times of enslavement in the 7th century until now, with continuing migration flows.

When the Black Lives Matter movement shook the world in 2020, prominent social-media activists, academics, and influencers of African descent from the region spoke up about the racism and discrimination they have endured. They referred to derogatory terms used to describe Blacks, in particular the word *abed* meaning “slave”; and the use of racist references in entertainment and the media.

Racial stereotypes and harmful rhetoric too often translate into marginalization of and discrimination against Africans and people of African descent. They can lead to the denial of access to housing, education, health care and employment, and in some cases, to violence, inhumane treatment and even death. The United Nations human rights mechanisms have highlighted in particular the situation of migrant domestic workers from Africa, especially women, who have allegedly been subjected to exploitation and abuse.

I welcome steps taken by some States in the region to address these issues as well as the situation of migrant workers and trafficking in persons, including through the establishment of six accredited national human rights institutions;[[1]](#footnote-1) the adoption of legislative measures that prohibit incitement of hatred and promotion of racial superiority ideology,[[2]](#footnote-2)

The Decade provides a framework for action to improve the lives of Africans and people of African descent. This meeting provides a space to listen to the voices and the lived experiences of Africans and people of African descent and to celebrate their histories and contributions. It creates a platform to exchange about promising practices and strengthened cooperation at local, national and regional levels.

Your Excellencies,

The first theme of the Decade that will be discussed is **Recognition, and by that we mean the** recognition of the importance of respecting obligations under the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, to which all States of the region are Parties. I encourage States to align national legislations with international human rights law, to collect data disaggregated by race and ethnicity, among other grounds, to adopt policies and programmes to combat racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance; and to promote the achievements, cultures and history of people of African descent making them more visible.

The second is **Justice**:access to justice, but also reparatory justice and measures to address systemic racism. And, **justice** can only be achieved through of course acknowledging the past legacies of enslavement and in particular the slave trade.

In the Durban Declaration, States have acknowledged that “slavery and the slave trade are a crime against humanity”, that “these are among the major sources of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance”, and that Africans and people of African descent, among others, “continue to be victims of that consequences.”

As elsewhere, enslaved Africans and their descendants have contributed significantly to the economic, social and cultural life and development of the region. The African men and women who moved – forcibly or voluntarily – to the region brought with them culture, tradition and art. This is notably prominent in the arts, such as the *tihamah* music, *tanburah* dancesand music instruments such as *zamzamiya*. I welcome initiatives undertaken in the region to acknowledge these legacies, including the Bin Jelmood House of the Msheireb museums in Qatar. I encourage Governments to further support academic research on and promote dissemination of knowledge of these aspects through the schools’ curricula; the media; museums; the arts; and throughout public life.

The Decade's third theme is **development.**  The Programme of Activities calls on States to “remove all obstacles that prevent the equal enjoyment of all human rights, economic, social, cultural, civil and political, including the right to development of people of African descent.” The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the right to development provide key frameworks allowing discussions around such obstacles and identification of concrete measures to address them.

Over the past year, we have seen a **strengthening of the United Nations anti-racism’s structure**. The **Permanent Forum for People of African Descent**,established as a principal platform for dialogue and consultations of people and with people of African descent will hold its inaugural session on 5-8 December of this year right here in Geneva.

**The International Independent Expert Mechanism to advance racial justice and equality in law enforcement** presented its first report at the last Human Rights Council session.

And earlier this month, the Intergovernmental Working Group on the Durban Declaration and Programme of Action discussed for the first time a **draft United Nations Declaration on the promotion and full respect of human rights of people of African descent***.*

Another important standard-setting exercise is the elaboration of a **draft additional protocol to ICERD (to the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination), criminalizing acts of a racist and xenophobic nature**.

And I encourage all of you to engage and actively participate in these processes in order that we can actually give them the impact and the strength that they were intended for.

Since 2015, our Office has worked in close cooperation with States, civil society, people of African descent, and our UN partners to implement the Programme of activities of the Decade.

In 2021, the High Commissioner presented a Four-Point Agenda Towards Transformative Change for Racial Justice and Equality. In implementing this Agenda, we are going to deploy regional advisers, including in our Regional Office for the Middle East and North Africa which is situated in Lebanon.

Our Office also continues to engage with civil society and people of African descent more directly. For example in Yemen, we have established the first National Council for Minorities in March of this year - a network of civil society organizations representing different groups, including people of African descent, to strengthen coordination and support efforts in advocacy for human rights and the elimination of marginalization and discrimination.

In May, the United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq (UNAMI), its Human Rights Office and the Office of the UN Special Adviser on the Prevention of Genocide co-facilitated a dialogue in Iraq with representatives of people of African descent, among other groups, on countering hate speech, tackling discrimination with the aim to devise actions to promote inclusion and prevent them.

In June, the UNAMI Human Rights Office in Iraq brought together 32 youth representatives from Iraq’s different groups, including those of African descent, in a celebration of cultural diversity and the promotion of tolerance and understanding.

Through our fellowship programme, we bring together people of African descent from various regions to learn about the anti-racism work of the United Nations. Since 2011, we have had 130 fellows from 39 countries. And this year, we will welcome an Afro-Iraqi woman, the first fellow from the Middle East. And of course, we hope to expand the participation in future years.

And as part of our awareness raising efforts, we are working with the United Nations Department of Global Communications and UNESCO on a campaign for the Decade. On 18 July – Mandela Day, our Office launched a two-year campaign entitled “Learn, Speak Up, Act.” On 31 August, the International Day for People of African Descent, we teamed up with radio stations and podcasters, including in Lebanon, that highlighted the heritage positively of people of African descent and discussed systemic racism.

Our Office continues of course to provide advice and technical support to Governments for the development of anti-discrimination legislation, national action plans and the establishment of national human rights institutions and equality bodies.

And I call upon all relevant actors across this region to join forces to support the putting in place of policies and practices, upholding the equal rights of all people, including people of African descent.

I am delighted that we have the opportunity to get a little bit more into these issues and I am very happy to be part of these discussions, wishing you very fruitful discussions.

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1. Bahrain, Iraq, Jordan, State of Palestine, Oman and Qatar. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Bahrain and Kuwait. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)