

Keynote Speech Delivered at the United Nations on the Occasion of the International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination

Theme "Learning from Historical Tragedies to Combat Racial Discrimination Today"

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Excellencies
Distinguished Guests
Friends all:

It is a privilege for me to address you as we approach another International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, proclaimed by this United Nations General Assembly in 1966— six years after the tragedy in South Africa that inspired its proclamation, and marked annually on March 21. I thank the President of the General Assembly of this United Nations, His Excellency Sam Kutesa, the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights and my colleague members of the Working Group of Experts on People of African Descent, for this signal honour. I applaud all of you assembled here this morning for showing, by your presence, that you share a common concern for the creation of a world in which racism, racial discrimination, Afrophobia, xenophobia and related intolerance play no part either in our personal lives or in our international relations.

Like me, you believe in the fundamental rights and freedoms enshrined in the group of international instruments adopted after World War II, as a response to the atrocities of the War, to protect the human rights and inherent dignity and the equal and inalienable rights of the human family. Within this context, racial discrimination is to be treated as abhorrent. So, I acknowledge the appropriateness of the theme chosen for this year's commemoration: "***Learning from Historical Tragedies to Combat Racial Discrimination Today.***" And the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD) is very explicit about what constitutes racial discrimination. It is,

“any distinction, exclusion, restriction or preference based on race, colour, descent, or national or ethnic origin which has the purpose or effect of nullifying or impairing the recognition, enjoyment or exercise, on an equal footing, of human rights and fundamental freedoms in the political, economic, social, cultural or any other field of public life.”

Many of us here are familiar with the major historical tragedies or inhumane actions that have affected global history and which were related to racial or ethnic hierarchizing and discrimination, including conquest, colonization, genocide against indigenous and minority populations, the African Maafa (trans-Atlantic “slave trade” and enslavement); wars to suppress enslaved-led protests and anti-colonial uprisings; the Jewish Holocaust; various acts of ethnic cleansing; racial apartheid, the brutal suppression of more modern civil rights, labour and independence movements; land appropriation and underdevelopment, 20th century wars of expansion to empower some nations at the expense of others – and the list goes on.

The historical tragedies outlined are not so remote in the past that we cannot recall them. And even if we wished to forget them, our artistes, authors, activists and human rights defenders will not allow us to do

so, because their books, artistic productions (films, paintings and songs), advocacy and their modern-day protests over the continued legacies of those historical wrongs, keep them in our consciousness.

There was untold suffering as a result of these tragedies and inhumane acts, including murder, torture, public flogging, imprisonment and general humiliation; and the descendants of those whose ancestors suffered, for example from the African Maafa and the Jewish Holocaust, have tried to find ways to memorialise their ancestors and seek redress for such tragedies, including through reparation.

Mr President, I stand before you as a product of some of those historical tragedies, the most tragic of which were the forced relocation of my ancestors from Africa and India to a life of enslavement and contract labour in the Caribbean and the post-slavery and post-indentureship regime of racial apartheid and neo-colonialism that so scarred Caribbean societies. But I also stand before you as a living example of what the battle against such historical tragedies can produce – a scholar activist and human rights defender, with no hate in her heart, who can work in local, regional and international spaces with other committed advocates to try to banish the legacies of those tragedies from our landscape.

But Mr President, I do harbour some degree of anxiety; anxiety, Mr President, because almost 50 years after the proclamation of this International Day, too many individuals, communities and societies continue to suffer from the injustices and stigma that racism brings. We still live in a world where ethnicity, socially constructed race, the tyranny of the pigmentocracy, gender, religious beliefs, cultural practices, sexual orientation and other differences act as barriers to racial harmony. And those who suffer most from racism and racial discrimination are Africans and people of African descent, which is why the United Nations Programme of Activities for the Decade for People of African descent, launched right here on International Human Rights Day 2014 under the theme “Recognition, Justice, Development”, is so critical. It offers us diverse strategies for righting the wrongs of the past so that we can build a more peaceful world; a world that Dr Martin Luther King, Jr. dreamed about all those years ago. He had a dream that his four little children would one day live in a nation where they would not be judged by the colour of their skin but by the content of their character.” I regret to say today that his dream has not been completely realised and historical experiences continue to adversely affect our contemporary world.

Yes, Mr President: we continue to be confronted with evidence that we are still some way from realising that goal of universal peace, inter-ethnic harmony and unbiased justice that so many have worked to achieve, indeed shed their blood to attain. We see the evidence today in the hands in the air [because] black lives matter campaign that has transformed itself from a local to a global movement; in the racial taunts directed at black players at football games where, on occasion, “macaco” (monkey) is shouted from the stands with complete disregard for the feelings of black players; in institutional and structural racism; in racial profiling at international borders and within some countries; in messages and ideas based on racism, racial superiority or hatred that incite racism; in targeted police stop and frisk or search; in differential access to jobs, housing, quality education and health care and justice; in disproportionate incarceration rates by ethnic groups; in biased textual and visual representations, cartoons and journalistic pieces that disrespect others’ religion and ethnicity; in everyday speech and attitudes that reflect xenophobia and bigotry, in cultural practices that humiliate particular ethnic groups, in the iconic symbols placed in some spaces that remind formerly oppressed populations of the perpetrators of the tragedies of the past -- and in so many other areas.

And so, today, I join with the international community in the global call for concrete action for the total elimination of racism, racial discrimination, Afrophobia, xenophobia and related intolerance and the comprehensive implementation of, and follow up to, the Durban Declaration and Programme of Action (the DDPA). Indeed, the DDPA, adopted at the World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance on 8th September 2001, underlines the fact that promoting greater

respect and trust among different groups within society must be a shared but differentiated responsibility of government institutions, political leaders, grassroots organizations and citizens.

This year 2015 is a timely reminder to all of us of our responsibilities to those who are the victims of racism, racial discrimination and related intolerance. It is the 50th Anniversary of the adoption of the ICERD – one of the most widely ratified human rights conventions - a good sign that we understand that a joined up approach is critical to solving this scourge on the global landscape.

This year is also the 51st anniversary of the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act in the USA that had such great implications for restoration of the rights and dignity of African-Americans, so many of whom had been brutalised by slavery and racial apartheid; we are approaching the 20th anniversary of The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action adopted at the Fourth World Conference on Women in 1995 and which reaffirmed the fundamental principle that the rights of women and girls are an “inalienable, integral and indivisible part of universal human rights” – a timely reminder in the face of the multiple forms of discrimination that women and girls face today.

It is the 50th anniversary of Bloody Sunday, that March 7 day in 1965 when police beat voting-rights activists as they attempted to march from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama to insist that voting rights should not be denied anyone because of the colour of their skins; it is the 150th anniversary of the 1865 Morant Bay Massacre in Jamaica, when over 400 Jamaicans were murdered by British Governor Edward Eyre and his army because they called out for the elimination of racial discrimination in the application of justice for a people emerging out of slavery without a plan of restorative justice by the colonial state; it is the 200th anniversary of Simón Bolívar’s “carta de Jamaica”, in which he explained his mission to liberate Latin America from colonial oppression; and it is the 211th anniversary of Haitian independence – won by enslaved and free black people in a country that made the colonial oppressor rich but impoverished a whole nation; a nation that had a hemispheric emancipatory project in the midst of attempts to bring it to its knees for taking back its freedom; a country that had to pay reparation for its right to be and which is still waiting for that historical injustice to be made right. The history of Haiti and Latin America is linked of course because President Pétiion of Haiti, on account of his aid to Bolívar’s revolutionary project for Venezuela and Latin America caused *Bolívar himself later ask: “Should I not let it be known to later generations that Alexander Pétiion is the true liberator of my country?”*

Let us use the coincidence of these anniversaries and the work of our academics and artistes to remind ourselves of the tragedies of the past; but let us also use these memories to recommit ourselves or – for those who never committed, to commit ourselves - to the creation of a world where we never again repeat such tragedies on our people. Let us resolve, like the ICERD, *“to adopt all necessary measures for speedily eliminating racial discrimination in all its forms and manifestations, and to prevent and combat racist doctrines and practices in order to promote understanding between races and to build an international community free from all forms of racial segregation and racial discrimination.”*

But Mr President, there is hope amidst the painful memories. As we reflect on 21 March 1960 when police [opened fire](#) and killed 69 men, women and children at a peaceful demonstration in [Sharpeville](#), South Africa against the [apartheid pass laws](#), let us celebrate the fact that since that tragic day, the apartheid system in South Africa has been dismantled and South Africa has made great efforts to ensure that never again will such an evil system as racial apartheid ever raise its ugly head in their country.

The global community has also made strides in terms of the elimination of racism and racial discrimination. Colonialism has ended in many more countries since 1960 and the superstructure of slavery and racial apartheid dismantled. Racist laws and practices have been abolished in many countries,

and the United Nations has built an international framework for fighting racism, guided by the ICERD) as well as by the Universal declaration of Human Rights and other rights-based instruments.

Today, as we mark the International Day for the Elimination of racial discrimination, the rest of us must commit ourselves to the fight against the repetition of historical tragedies like the Sharpville Massacre; and the theme for this year mandates us to do so.

The USA has its Edmund Pettus Bridge, the scene of the Bloody Sunday clashes, but we can build our own metaphorical or symbolic bridges – bridges of understanding – and extend such bridges – across the human family- from Alaska to Argentina; from the Norwegian Sea to the Mediterranean Sea; from Scotland to Siberia; from Algiers to Cape Town; from Jordan to Japan and from Russia to New Zealand - hands across the world for the good of us all and in memory of victims of historical tragedies and the revolutionary struggles against conquest, colonization, colonialism, imperialism, genocide, underdevelopment and various injustices. And so today we remember some of the victims of the Sharpville Massacre, among them:

Wiggi Bakela, James Beshe, James Buti Bessie, Ephraim Chaka, Gilbert Demo, Gilbert Poho Dimo; Jeremiah Hlanyane, Eliot Kabe, Elliot Sekoala Kabi, Miriam Lekitla; Jacob Mafabela; Paulina Mafulatse.

And because of the region that I am from, I am obliged to remind this audience of the victims of revolutionary struggles to end slavery, racial apartheid and colonial rule in the Americas, the region in which the greatest crime against humanity was committed and where each day we struggle to eliminate the remnants of historical tragedies and racial discrimination, among them:

Abba, Philda and Queen of Antigua/Barbuda; Sally Bassett of Bermuda, burned at the stake in 1730 because she refused to collaborate with the system of slavery; Bussa of Barbados; Zumbi dos Palmares of Brazil; Tula of Curaçao; General Buddhoe and Martin King of the former Danish Caribbean; Kofi of Guyana; Boukman Dutty, Cécile Fatima, Dessalines and Toussaint L'Overture of Haiti; Ann James, Chief Tacky, Samuel Sharpe and Paul Bogle, of Jamaica; ; the legendary Lohkay, St. Martin's Maroon heroine whose breast was amputated for running away from the evil system of slavery; Yagna of Mexico; the leader of the 1639 revolt in St. Kitts/Nevis whose body was quartered and the limbs hung in the most public places; Joseph Chatoyer of St. Vincent and the Grenadines; Alida of Suriname; Roo and Bastian of Trinidad & Tobago; Harriet Tubman, Denmark Vessey, Emmett Till, Martin Luther King Jnr. Malcolm X, Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, Eric Garner, of the USA; and Latin American Independistas and racial equality activists: Bernardo O'Higgins, Ernesto "Ché" Guevara; José María Teclo Morelos y Pavó, José Martí, Juan Gualberto Gómez Ferre, José de San Martín, José Prudencio Padilla, Mariano Moreno, Miguel Hidalgo y Castilla; Simón Bolívar, and so many, many more.

We must sing praise songs for these men and women whose revolutionary ideology and programme were clearly anchored in their experience and in their sense of what had become, as the late Rex Nettleford often termed it, a derided and emasculated ancestral culture.

May Nelson Mandela's impassioned words forever ring in our ears: "Never, Never, and Never Again shall it be that this beautiful land will again experience the oppression of one by another". And may we modify those words and make our own commitment and pledge "Never, Never and Never again will our beautiful world, continue to be scarred by racial hatred and intolerance of diversity and descend into chaos because of obduracy and intolerance. Like our soccer players, we will kick racism off side; we will ban "macaco" (monkey chants) from the side-lines and we will join hands across the continents and oceans and build sturdier bridges of understanding.

We do not want any more racially inspired wars BUT, equally, the late Jamaican artiste Peter Tosh has long cautioned that there can be no peace without equal rights and justice; and the late Robert Nesta “Bob” Marley, that revolutionary icon, using the philosophy of His Imperial Majesty, Haile Selassie the 1st long cautioned (and I paraphrase):

Until the philosophy which holds one race superior and another inferior is finally and permanently discredited and abandoned; everywhere is war. Until there are no longer first class and second class citizens of any nation; until the colour of a person's skin is of no more significance than the colour of his/her eyes; until the basic human rights are equally guaranteed to all, without regard to race - Dis a war. That until that day, the dream of lasting peace, world citizenship and rule of international morality will remain but a fleeting illusion to be pursued, but never attained.

To avoid any such consequence, let us do today what we did in the past to end slavery, apartheid, colonial rule, discriminatory laws and practices and various unjust wars – form a united front comprising all nations, ethnic and religious groups, genders, classes and castes to end racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance and let us do it now in a spirit of mutual respect and tolerance, and by so doing demonstrate our commitment to the foundational principle of the inherent dignity of the human person.

I thank you.