

**Opening Remarks by Ilze Brands Kehris, Assistant Secretary-General for Human Rights**

**WGEPAD 27<sup>th</sup> virtual session The Urgency of Now: Systemic Racism and the Lessons of 2020**

**Monday 30 November @ 14.00 CET (via interprefy platform)**

Members of the Working Group, Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

OHCHR is pleased to welcome you to the Working Group of experts on people of African descent 27<sup>th</sup> virtual session entitled “The Urgency of Now: Systemic Racism and the Lessons of 2020”.

As the topic clearly conveys, there can be no mistaking the relevance and timeliness of this session.

For too long, people of African descent have been victims of systemic racism and racial discrimination. These are unacceptable violations of fundamental human rights. It is our urgent and collective duty to effectively address these violations, including their root causes, and to combat impunity.

COVID-19 has given additional impetus to that urgency. While the pandemic has brought profound disruption and pain worldwide, it has had disproportionately devastating impact on people of African descent, in terms of death rates and negative health impacts as well as the socio-economic toll, both immediately and over time.

COVID-19 has exposed glaring inequalities in all societies. People who were already in vulnerable and disadvantaged situations, whose human rights are insufficiently protected, are the worst affected by COVID-19. Among them are indigenous peoples, people of African descent and people belonging to national or ethnic, religious and linguistic minorities, whose rights have been violated by systemic racial discrimination and as a consequence of the legacy of the past.

The grievances at the heart of the global anti-racism protests need to be not only heard, but addressed. The impunity for racist violence must stop, and member states must live up to their commitments to racial equality and justice. We need far-reaching reforms and inclusive dialogue. To effectively dismantle systemic racism, discriminatory structures and institutions, we must have an honest assessment of the past, including acknowledging and addressing the enduring consequences of colonialism and the transatlantic trade in enslaved Africans.

Following the killing of George Floyd, and thanks to the global anti-racism movement, there has been an awakening and focus on systemic racism. This is an important opportunity that requires us to act. The Urgent Debate in the Human Rights Council in May, and its resolution 43/1, provide a clear mandate to our Office to report on the issue of systemic racism and racial injustice. As you are aware, OHCHR is working to implement the resolution in partnership with the Working Group and other key stakeholders.

Our Office is also contributing initiatives to strengthen UN system-wide action to address, prevent and eliminate racism and racial discrimination. Among other actions, we have relaunched the UN Network on Racial Discrimination and Protection of Minorities, including engagement at senior level, for stepped up and better coordinated activities. This is in spirit of the Secretary-General's Call to Action for Human Rights, which underscores that human rights are the responsibility of all UN actors, everywhere and at all times.

Next year, the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Durban Declaration and Programme of Action (DDPA), together with the Mid-term review of the International Decade for People of African descent and the 2030 Sustainable development Agenda, offer platforms to ensure that racial equality and equity are central on global and national agendas.

Specifically, the DDPA and the Outcome document of the Durban Review Conference, together with the International Convention on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, constitute a comprehensive international framework to address racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance. Now is the time for all of us to set priorities and future actions and seize this chance to renew and strengthen commitments to implement the Durban Programme and Plan of Action.

People of African descent worldwide face common challenges including legacies of the transatlantic slave trade; colonialism; racism and structural discrimination. Socio-economic inequalities, exclusion, marginalization and injustice continue and have even increased, reinforcing pre-existing patterns of racial discrimination.

The mid-term review of the International Decade for People of African Descent therefore presents a valuable opportunity to focus attention on the situation of people of African descent and the discrimination they continue to face. It's a chance to enhance the protection of their human rights in law and in practice. In particular, it is time to reassert the commitment to implementing its programme of activities to achieve the goals of Recognition, Justice and Development for people of African descent.

Now is the time to recommit to eradicating racial discrimination in all its forms. States must act with determination to implement their obligation to prohibit and eliminate racial discrimination, to guarantee the right of every person –regardless of race, colour, national or ethnic origin – to equality before the law.

We must prioritize resources and focus our efforts on actions that deliver real results. We all can and must contribute to making this moment a critical turning point in the respect, fulfillment and protection of the human rights of people of African descent. Our Office stands ready to support the fight against racism in anyway it can.

I wish you every success in your deliberations and look forward to your conclusions and recommendations.

Thank you.