



**Third Session of the Permanent Forum on People of African Descent  
Tuesday 16 April, 2024 10:00AM (CET) | Palais des Nations | Geneva, Switzerland  
Remarks UNFPA Executive Director Dr. Natalia Kanem (6 mins)**

Madame Chair, Dr. June Soomer, and Members of the Permanent Forum on People of African Descent,  
Excellencies,  
Distinguished delegates,  
Dear young people,

Greetings of Peace – the noble purpose of the United Nations, and the fervent wish of people of African descent wherever we may reside. Peace in the home. Peace in our communities. And Peace in this all too-turbulent world.

Listen... [PAUSE] do you hear a drum? That steady, talking drumbeat that invites you to dialogue. It resonates from Africa to the Caribbean and pulsates throughout the Americas — and far beyond.

From the talking drums of Nigeria and Ghana to the big drums of Benin, the Trinidad and Tobago steel pan, to the virtuoso riffs of great jazz drummers the world over – all are soundscapes of the unity of people of African descent, even in the face of adversity.

The drum. It has been used to pass on our rich history from generation to generation.

During the era of enslavement, the drum was a means of distance communication used by the maroons in the highlands of Jamaica, the quilombolos in the heartlands of Brazil. It was a keenly felt calamity when the drum was taken away as a means to divide.

However, it proved impossible to conquer the indomitable spirit of Africa’s children yearning for freedom. It is up to us to share their stories of resistance and resilience.

The United Nations did so last month, when an exhibition co-sponsored by UNFPA was unveiled at UN headquarters, a collection of exquisite charcoal portraits by artist Donovan Nelson. Together, the portraits tell the story of “Ibo Landing.”



In the year 1803, as the story entails, a community of some 75 Igbo people — everyone from the Chief, the priest, the healer, the farmer, women, men and children — were taken by force onto canoes and paddled out onto a big ship looming on the horizon.

The captives came from what's now southern Nigeria. As the ship traversed the Atlantic across the notorious Middle Passage, they weathered hazards and were subjected to unimaginable suffering.

Months later, the survivors landed onto St. Simon's island, off the coast of the present-day State of Georgia in the United States of America.

The Chief and priest stepped onto the land first, so we are told. The rest of the Igbo people followed. As the Chief and priest gazed deep into the forest, they divined the future that awaited. They then turned around to face the sea.

With a motion of their hands, they indicated the way forward.

Marching back into the water, one by one, man, woman and child. And so it is said, those ancestors left Ibo Landing, one by one, step by step, walking on the water, all the way back to the motherland, Africa.

*The water brought us; the water will take us away.*

Distinguished delegates,

As Toni Morrison said: "The function of freedom is to free someone else."

The International Decade for People of African Descent is part of that Freedom Trail.

Launched in 2015, the UN has been engaging people of African descent and tapping into their diverse knowledge and experience for the justice, recognition and development of Africa's sixth region, its extensive diaspora some 200 million strong.



Abundant research and evidence shows us who among them is being left behind, helping us chart the path forward.

Discrimination in all its forms contributes to poorer health outcomes for Afro-descendant women and girls.

UNFPA research finds women of African descent in the Americas are more vulnerable to mistreatment and neglect by health-care providers. Maternal death rates are higher among Afro-descendant women, who continue to confront racial and other prejudices.

And women of African descent are more likely to experience gender-based violence.

We also know based on extensive research conducted by UNFPA and others that it is our Afro-descendant girls who are being shut out of the progress that their international counterparts are making globally.

In the next phase of the International Decade for People of African Descent, UNFPA asks you to focus specifically on the full equality and leadership of women, and on lifting up young people of African descent.

Let's uphold their right to comprehensive sexuality education and to the services and life skills that protect them from a life derailed by teen pregnancy and sexual abuse.

Let's give every Black girl on the planet the tools she needs to realize she is precious, she's beautiful and that her whole community is with her to support her in reaching her full potential – and all of ours.

Let's remember that when we improve the life of an Afro-descendant woman or girl, the prospects of her entire community and nation improve.

The drum beats for her wellbeing, for her acceptance as a person worthy to defend. The drum beats for her freedom. Let's unite and keep the drumbeat going for her rights, for her choices, and that of generations to come.