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

**Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights**

**31 October 2022**

Madame Deputy High Commissioner, Dear Nada,

Mr Ali Hussein Al Sammak, Head of the Arab League Mission in Geneva,

Mrs Campbell, Former Vice-President of Costa Rica and Member of the Permanent Forum of People of African Descent,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am very honored to be invited to speak at the regional meeting for the Middle East on the International Decade for People of African Descent.

Recognising the intertwining of the history of women and men of African descent with the Middle East allows us to reconcile ourselves with our shared memory, the atrocity of slavery and the slave trade, and the indisputable contribution of afro-descendants to our modern societies.

One example of this contribution is the Liwa dance, performed in some Arab States of the Persian Gulf and initially developed by communities coming from the Swahili Coast. The songs associated to this dance are still performed in Swahili.

Over the past 30 years, UNESCO’s Routes of Enslaved Peoples Project has produced knowledge, developed scientific networks and accompanied and supported memorial initiatives on slavery and the historical fights for its abolition. The project has played an important role in bridging the gaps in common history by breaking down the walls of silence built to keep the history of slavery at bay, thus denying its place in universal memory.

Today, in collaboration with its Scientific Committee and committed UN agencies, the project plays a key role in deconstructing racial prejudice against Afro-descendants and indigenous peoples through evidence-based research, knowledge production, capacity-building, artistic expressions and initiatives to heal the trans-generational trauma inherited from slavery. We are moreover carrying out a mapping on the memorial sites as an important acknowledgment of this shared history, and an understanding of how it has shaped our modern world.

But the question of the slave trade and its consequences on contemporary societies has changed and must be reconsidered in the light of several recent major phenomena, such as the health and economic crisis and the social movements against racism and discrimination.

In order to respond better to these challenges, the project has become a main component of the Organization’s efforts to upscale work against racism and discrimination, also illustrated by UNESCO’s Antiracism Roadmap and the organization of the annual Forums against Racism, the second edition of which will be organized on 28-29 November 2022 in Mexico City.

In this respect, UNESCO is carrying out research on the cost of racism to inform policymakers on how to address the barriers that prevent certain groups from having equal access to education, housing, employment and justice.

We will also address the issue of modern slavery with a focus on afro-descendants and on understanding what makes modern slavery reminiscent of the history of the slave trade and slavery.

As the study of the past to better understand modern challenges is at the centre of the Routes of Enslaved Peoples project, I am pleased that so many panels on recognition, justice and development are the pillars of this meeting.

Nelson Mandela once said: “To deny people their human rights, is to challenge their very humanity.” I would like to conclude my remarks by adding that UNESCO is working precisely to highlight the humanity and individuality of these millions of Africans and their descendants, and fight for their rights.

Thank you.