

Agenda item 67 (b): Special Meeting of the General Assembly in
Commemoration of the International Day for the Elimination of Racial
Discrimination

21 March, 2014

On behalf of the President of the United Nations General Assembly
H. E. Dr. John W. Ashe

Excellencies,
Deputy Secretary-General,
Mr. Ivan Šimonović, Assistant Secretary-General for Human Rights,
Distinguished Delegates,
Ms. Gay McDougall,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am pleased to be here today on behalf of the President of 68th session of the United Nations General Assembly, John W. Ashe, who regrets that he is unable to take part in this commemoration. The President is well aware that the scourge and pain of racism are still widely prevalent around the world, and that racism's many ignorant manifestations take a heavy toll on our world and its progress.

As we observe the 2014 International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, we call to mind those whom we honor today – the 69 people who died at the hands of the Sharpeville Massacre; men, women and children who lost their lives in the quest for equality and dignity; those whose deaths galvanized the world to act to end apartheid. Fitting to the theme of this year's commemoration of 'The Role of Leaders in Combatting Racism and Racial Discrimination,' we also call to mind the great spirit of Nelson Mandela who left us in December. His unending determination to bring equality to his people is a legacy we are all called to carry forward.

Today we feel the pain of those who suffered and still suffer racism and racial discrimination, particularly those dozens of unarmed protestors in Sharpeville, South Africa. But we also honour their courageous acts, and the fact that a small group of people, or one man in the case of Madiba, can ignite great change. Today is a reminder that the elimination of racial discrimination is possible, and indeed some might say, inevitable.

Excellencies,

In December 2013, we celebrated the sixty-fifth anniversary of the adoption of one of the most important, landmark human rights instruments of our times – the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR). This anniversary was marked by ceremony, but at the same time, we must concede that humankind continually struggles with the affirmation contained in Article 1 of the UDHR – that all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights and are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood.

This dichotomy of recognizing a truth in theory and actually living it in practice is very much present in our world today. On one hand, the UDHR has inspired a growing body of human rights instruments. There are mechanisms to monitor and reinforce their implementation, which are strengthened by national protection systems. Yet on the other hand, racism still affects our societies and human rights are still routinely violated, as many people still face discrimination on those grounds.

Even as we hold today's commemoration, we know that poor, vulnerable, marginalized populations and minorities are continually discriminated against based on, inter alia, race, colour or national origin. Too many suffer from persecution and are denied equal access to the law and recognition before the law. Such violations occur far too often.

One positive step would be to fully implement and operationalize the instruments we already have in place. In the nearly five decades since the

General Assembly proclaimed the first International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination and despite the three Decades for Action to Combat Racism and Racial Discrimination previously declared by the United Nations, the Programmes of Action for the Decades have not been fully implemented and their objectives remain unrealized.

At the same time, in spite of a near-universal ratification of the International Convention on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, too many individuals and communities still suffer from the stigma and the systemic effects of racism. Lack of effective implementation of the Durban Declaration and Programme of Action, has also hindered efforts to effectively eradicate the scourge of racism worldwide.

Distinguished Guests,

Racism is a global problem and requires global action, and there are a number of important ways we can continue to work toward the elimination of racism worldwide. In this regard, we look forward to seeing the draft programme for the implementation of the International Decade for People of African Descent, which will be developed by the Intergovernmental Working Group on the Effective Implementation of the Durban Declaration and Programme of Action. This important Decade will begin in 2015 and will create an opportunity to mobilize the world's energy to promote equality for people of African descent and contribute to greater economic and social development, social justice and inclusion.

We also hope to use the opportunity, in four days, of the commemoration of the abolition of the transatlantic slave trade and the abhorrent practice of slavery as a reminder that contemporary forms of racism are still all too pervasive in our societies. We must redouble efforts to ensure that, as the UDHR calls for, all people are free from servitude and slavery.

Today's debate on racial discrimination can also contribute to the discussions on the post-2015 development agenda, which should emphasize eliminating

discrimination in laws, policies and practices. This includes combating all forms and manifestations of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance and eliminating violence and hate crimes against particular groups.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Article 1.3 of the United Nations Charter calls for respect for human rights and for fundamental freedoms for all without distinction as to race, sex, language, or religion. Guided by the UN Charter and its Article 1.3, the General Assembly has approved resolution 68/151, which has brought us together for this special event today. It shows Member States continued commitment to the fight against racism. So let us remain steadfast in our efforts, let us turn theory into practice and let us honor those who died in Sharpeville by continuing to seek change. And may the legacy of Madiba inspire all leaders and all people around the globe to work tirelessly toward a world free of racism.

Thank you.