

Check against delivery

Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination

89th Session, 25 April to 13 May 2016



Opening Address by

**Mr. Ibrahim Salama,
Director of Human Rights Treaties Division**

**Palais Wilson, Ground Floor Conference Room
Monday 25 April 2016, 10.00 a.m.**

Distinguished Chairperson,
Distinguished members,
Ladies and gentlemen,

It is a great pleasure to welcome you to the **eighty-ninth session of the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination**. To begin, I would like to warmly welcome the new members of the Committee elected last June: Mr. Nicolás MARÚGAN , Ms. Gay MCDUGAL , Ms. Yemhelhe Mint MOHAMED , Ms. Verene Albertha SHEPHERD and Ms. Yanduan LI.

In this context, I would like to congratulate the Committee for an historic accomplishment: for the first time in 46 years since its establishment, there are now seven women serving as experts of this Committee. bringing the representation of women to 40%. This is indeed a landmark moment in the Committee's history, given that there was only one woman during the first session of the Committee in 1970, followed by two decades with no women (1978 – 1998); and it was only in 2012 that three women were elected as experts. This leap towards greater gender parity has resulted in part due to the sustained efforts made by the Chairs of this Committee who have continuously raised the need for gender parity in their statements to the General Assembly and with States parties.

I am delighted to witness this evolution of the Committee as we continue to reflect upon and celebrate your achievements in the context of the 50th anniversary of the adoption of the Convention, and the 15th anniversary of the Durban Declaration and Programme of Action. Milestones such as these offer us an opportunity to take stock of the progress we have made, and contemplate on all that remains to be done to eliminate racial discrimination. I am certain that your expertise

and diverse experience will continue to strengthen and enrich the Committee's work.

Distinguished members,

Since your last session in December 2015, the topic of racial discrimination was raised during several crucial interventions by the High Commissioner, Deputy High Commissioner and the Special Rapporteur on Minority Issues, among others.

The High Commissioner, in his opening statement to the 31st session of the Human Rights Council on 29 February 2016, strongly conveyed his concern that rising racist discriminatory and xenophobic rhetoric is contributing to rising violence as well as to preventing minorities from obtaining equal opportunities. Further, on 15 April 2016, at Case Western Reserve University in the United States, the High Commissioner warned against hatred and violence, stating that in the "...world's current turmoil, we see a great deal of such howling – cries of xenophobia and racism, religious prejudice and ethnic hatred. And I fear many people are once again succumbing to its allure..."

In the same speech the High Commissioner highlighted the way forward by noting that every country's national interest is served best by working for the common good, not for divisiveness. Equality and fairness must be taught, nurtured and defended, for it is they that build societies that are resilient and strong." Against these warnings, and strong reminder of all that is left to be done to eliminate racial discrimination, the work of this Committee is ever more pressing in the challenging global circumstances of today.

This April, the Deputy High Commissioner opened the 18th session of the Working Group of Experts on People of African Descent. She echoed the statement of the Working Group the Special Rapporteur on Racism and this Committee, to mark the International Day Against Racial Discrimination that ‘very little progress has been made in tackling racism, afrophobia, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance, and instead we see an alarming increase of hate and xenophobic speech echoing across the globe’.

Finally, the Special Rapporteur on Minority Issues Ms. Rita Izsak Ndiaye presented a *thematic study on minorities and discrimination based on caste and analogous systems of inherited status* to the Human Rights Council in March. The Special Rapporteur dedicated her annual report to caste-based discrimination because of her concern about “incidents of discrimination in caste-based and analogous systems of inherited status, including atrocities committed against individuals ascribed to the lowest strata by virtue of their caste status.” She highlighted the vast reach of caste-based discrimination which is reportedly affecting an estimated quarter of a billion people around the world, including in Asia, Africa, the Middle East, the Pacific region and in diaspora communities. As you will see on your agendas, the Special Rapporteur agreed to brief this Committee on the thematic report during your next session in August.

I would also like to update you on some actions taken within the UN system in your field since your last session in December 2015. As you know, last year, the General Assembly adopted the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, described as a “towering achievement” for development by the Secretary General. Importantly, the text has some focus on the human rights component of development. Reassuringly, it is

explicitly grounded in the UN Charter, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and the international human rights treaties. Throughout the preamble language, the goals and the targets, the text offers a universal, integrated and indivisible vision of sustainable development.

The agenda places the struggle against inequalities, discrimination and exclusion at its heart with two dedicated goals on combatting discrimination and inequalities. In particular, Goal 10.3 on *Reducing inequality within and among countries* states: “Ensure equal opportunity and reduce inequalities of outcome, including by eliminating discriminatory laws, policies, and practices and promoting appropriate legislation, policies and action in this regard.” And finally there is a strong engagement to disaggregate data along those goals. This is where the information provided under the treaty body system can play an important part.

The treaty bodies have therefore an unprecedented opportunity to bring human rights to the front and centre of sustainable development issues, particularly in the agenda’s new focus on accountability. OHCHR is working with UN partners and developing a strategy on SDG implementation, which seeks, amongst other things, to strengthen the role of human rights mechanisms in ensuring duty-bearers are accountable for the SDGs. In this context, I encourage this Committee to consider the SDG agenda and also your possible role in its implementation.

As you know, as required by General Assembly resolution 68/268 on the treaty body strengthening process, States have committed to consider the state of the human rights treaty body system in 2020 and to decide on further action to enhance its functioning.

Strengthening the treaty body system should ultimately contribute to a better protection of human rights on the ground, especially for the most vulnerable populations.

In January 2015, Norway and Switzerland convened a meeting of States, independent experts and treaty body members in Wilton Park, where the concept of an independent study to explore options for treaty body reform in the context of the 2020 review emerged. In June 2016, during the 27th Chairpersons' Meeting, Costa Rica called for a worldwide academic process to reflect on the future of the treaty body system.

Following this call, the Geneva Academy of International Humanitarian Law and Human Rights (hereafter 'the Geneva Academy'), invited a small group of independent researchers to brainstorm on different scenarios in the lead-up to the 2020 review and to define the parameters for an academic research project that will look at future options for reform and the long-term sustainability of the treaty body system. The research project, entitled Academic Platform Project on the 2020 Review, aims to develop innovative proposals and solutions. The participants of the academic platform will be widened to a larger group of independent researchers and an academic institution is being identified in each region to organize regional workshops.

This academic process is open to all relevant stakeholders, including treaty body members. I am pleased that a representative of the Geneva Academy will fully brief you during the course of this session.

Distinguished members of the Committee,

I would like to conclude by wishing you a very productive session and reiterate the great appreciation of the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights for your extremely valuable work. I am of course available now for any questions or comments you may have.

Thank you.