COMMEMORATIVE PLENARY MEETING ON THE INTERNATIONAL DAY FOR THE ELIMINATION OF RACIAL DISCRIMINATION

Ms. Kate Gilmore
United Nations Deputy High Commissioner for Human Rights

New York, 25 March 2019
President of the General Assembly, Secretary General, Distinguished Ambassadors, ladies and gentlemen,

It is my honor to bring you the warmest greetings of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Michelle Bachelet, on the occasion of the International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination.

Excellencies,

A national president once stood at just such a podium to urge from this assembly a more consequential understanding ...

"That until the philosophy which holds one race superior and another inferior is finally and permanently discredited and abandoned; Until there are no longer first class and second-class citizens of any nation; Until the color of a man's skin is of no more significance than the color of his eyes; Until bigotry, prejudice and malicious, inhuman self-interest have been replaced by understanding, tolerance and good-will, Until human rights are equally guaranteed to all without regard to race"

Until that day, the dream of lasting peace ...

And, now he would surely add "the dream of sustainable development"

will remain but a fleeting illusion, to be pursued but never to be attained."

Inclusive equality's normative and legal framework – thanks to early advocacy of such member states as Jamaica and Ghana - is now many decades established. However, millions still pay the cruel cost and casualty of race-based discrimination – of that "maximum of hatred for minimum of reason"¹ which is xenophobia, anti-Semitism, islamophobia – intricate, toxic confinements of human opportunity, capability and contribution; narrowing, distorting and scaring human potential; offering pretenders’ justifications for unjust distribution of power, possibility and influence.

Racism’s callous, multi-lane-ed intersections too with such as poverty, age, disability, gender identity and sexual orientation, meaning that race-based contempt, and the inequalities it fosters, is all the more hateful for women of African descent; for indigenous people fighting for land rights against rapacious developers; for those who, in flight from conflict and crisis, seek exercise of their right to asylum; for human rights defenders who, at risk even to their lives, bravely stand up against hatefulness.

Racism is a clear and present drain and drag on the equal participation and contribution of all people to their sustainable development; seeding instead grievance, violence and conflict; eating away at our mutual prosperity. Today’s populists, by peddling these worn contempts anew,

¹ Abraham Joshua Heschel
intensify, as history warns us, the gravest impediments to the purposes of this Organization and to achievement of the 2030 agenda.

Well may we call for greater efficiency and effectiveness in the operations of our systems and from investments of our resources, but in an era of austerity, at a time of frugality, when our planet strains under resource scarcity, how can we tolerate one moment more of racism’s reckless waste of our most precious resource - the talent, capability and contribution and courage of all people.

No matter how inconvenient equalities’ demands are to those who benefit so well from their refusal, in the necessary quest for all human rights upheld for all, there is neither east nor west - no north or south – there is only the inhumane and the humane.

You don’t have to be like me to respect my rights. I don’t have to be like you to uphold your rights. We do not have to agree with each other to defend each other’s rights. Rights are not a beauty parade or a reward system; but are for the best and the worst of us; for every one of us with the exception of none of us, for the inclusion of each of us, in the interests of all us.

Excellencies,

The American activist artist Billy Holliday sang out with her poet’s voice against the horror that is racism:

"Southern trees bear strange fruit / Blood on the leaves and blood at the root / Black bodies swinging in the southern breeze / Strange fruit hanging from the poplar trees”.

In a world that flourishes readily spite, hate and bigotry in the name of your skin, of my identity, against their faith - strange fruit buds again on populist trees: – imprisonment of minority journalists; arbitrary detention of political dissidents; assassinations of indigenous environmentalists; slaughter of people at worship; rejection at our borders of the refugee in flight; bullying of our children for their identity; indiscriminate rounding up of people simply for who they are.

Such cruelties will not leave this place untroubled. This isn’t the Uniform Nations, but it must be the United Nations - united by its founding Charter’s affirmation which the UDHR enshrined – that born we all are free and equal in dignity and rights; and united too against those forces that would erode that affirmation, for which there is no conscionable alternative.

Excellencies,

More than half a century ago, Halie Selassie - who I quoted earlier - closed his remarks to the General Assembly in these terms:

"This Organization and each of its members must become bigger than we have been: more courageous, greater in spirit, larger in outlook - members of a new race, overcoming petty prejudice, owing our ultimate allegiance not to nations but to our fellow human beings within the human community. “

On this International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, and in its many successors quotidian, may these United Nations truly stand out as it stands up for that which it was created to stand for – for all human rights for all.