GENERAL ASSEMBLY

Commemorative Plenary Meeting
International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination

Statement by Ms. E. Tendayi Achiume
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New York, United Nations Headquarters, 25 March 2019
Excellencies,

It is a privilege to address you in my capacity as Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance, but I address you with a heavy heart.

This is my third address to the General Assembly. At my first address, also on the International Day Against Racism, I joined the many who mourned the death but celebrated the life of Afro-Brazilian anti-racism activist Mariella Franco, shortly after her gruesome assassination. My second address was for the purposes of presenting my thematic report, which mapped the many different ways resurgent ethno-nationalist populism today undermines racial equality globally.\(^1\) I presented that report in October 2018, a few days after the horrendous anti-Semitic shooting of Jewish worshippers at the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh. And as we commemorate the International Day Against Racism this year, we do so in the shadow of the recent Islamophobic shooting of Muslim worshippers in Christchurch, New Zealand.

In declaring the first International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, the General Assembly called upon the international community to redouble its efforts to eliminate all forms of racial discrimination. More than fifty years later, the United Nations and its Member States remain far from achieving this goal. The resurgence of ethno-nationalist populism and extreme supremacist ideologies, and the dead bodies that lie in the wake of this resurgence, make clear that greater urgency is required within the United Nations, and among Member States to tackle racial discrimination, racism, xenophobia and related intolerance.

\(^1\) _The Threat of Nationalist Populism to Racial Equality_, Report of the Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance to the United Nations General Assembly (October 2018), A/73/305.
What are the dangers of ethno-nationalist populism and ideologies of racial or ethnic supremacy?

As I mentioned, I submitted a report on this very topic to the General Assembly in 2018, and it is my sincere hope that Member States will draw on this report and the many other reports and recommendations from within the UN human rights system on what is required to achieve racial equality and combat discrimination and intolerance, including in the face of extremist supremacist ideologies.

Michelle Bachelet, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, reminds us that racism kills.² It kills in the direct forms I have mentioned above—mass killings motivated by supremacist ideologies. But racism and xenophobia also kill, maim, degrade and marginalize through institutions and structures, and this broader context similarly warrants attention. The very date chosen for the International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination—March 21—recalls the horror of racial violence embedded in formal legal and policy structures. This date marks the Sharpeville Massacre in South Africa, a date marred by brutal police violence and murder of individuals protesting Apartheid “pass laws.”

Today, ethno-nationalist populism’s demonization of “foreign” populations has emboldened many States to carry out racially discriminatory practices including: discriminatory revocation or denial of citizenship; arbitrary detention or expulsion of immigrant communities; and wanton violation of principles of non-refoulement. And where political victories have accompanied populist demonization of racial, religious, indigenous or ethnic groups, these

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² “The murderous Islamophobic and terrorist attack, just hours ago, on two mosques in New Zealand is yet another terrible reminder that racism kills.”
groups are now the renewed targets of brazen hate crimes and hate speech.

Ethno-nationalist populist politics do more than sustain violence and hate speech. In my report, I document how these politics also sustain structural exclusion through: voter suppression aimed at racial, ethnic and other minorities; constitutional and legislative amendments to exclude certain groups from political life on racial, ethnic, religious or other grounds; and undemocratic restrictions of civic space. Ethno-nationalist populist politics also typically operate to undermine the rights of women, LGBTQ persons, and persons with disabilities.

The International Convention on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination entered into force in 1969, fifty years ago. As you—the Member States of the United Nations—wrestle with the state of the world, a world over which you have ultimate control, this convention remains a powerful resource for you, providing a legal and institutional framework for the difficult work that is your responsibility. That convention makes clear that the elimination of racial discrimination requires more than merely treating the symptoms of racial discrimination. Rather, it requires you to address the underlying, embedded, systemic causes of this discrimination.

Yet many States seem to have taken the opposite approach, some denying that racial discrimination exists within their country, others going so far as to remove the word “race” from domestic antidiscrimination law while structures of racial subordination remain undisturbed.

The truth is, you, the Member States of the United Nations, are not doing enough to take seriously the breadth and depth of global systems of racial and ethnic discrimination and intolerance.
To take seriously the obligation to eliminate racial discrimination: States must take action against supremacist ideologies; States must account for historical and ongoing projects of slavery, colonialism, and apartheid, all of which are rooted in supremacist ideologies; and States must show commitment to ending subjugation on the basis of race, ethnicity, national origin, religion or any other related categories. Political leaders should foreground substantive equality of all individuals in their politics and rhetoric, and educational systems should uphold obligations to combat prejudice and promote understanding among all peoples. As Prime Minister Arden of New Zealand is demonstrating in response to the attack in her country, it is possible to respond to terror and hatred by seeking strength in solidarity and unity, rather than in divisive discourses at odds with human rights. Member States must confront the truth that expedient politics of exclusion are incompatible with a just domestic order, and furthermore such politics can destroy the very foundations of domestic order.

Celebrations such as the International Day Against Racism are meaningless unless they are accompanied with the urgent, systemic and sustained action truly required to ensure that race, ethnicity, national origin or any related social category is no longer the reason why some people die, while others live. The world needs talk and serious action.

For those on the front line of racial violence, racial terror, structural discrimination and structural exclusion, every day has to be a day against racism if they are to survive. This struggle is not a struggle shared by all. There are many in the world and in this room who have the privilege—on account of their race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation or class—of only thinking or worrying about discrimination and intolerance when they see it covered in the news or reported by others. Yet defeating racial discrimination and intolerance cannot and
should not be a fight waged exclusively or even primarily by those subject to discrimination, intolerance and inclusion. Every single person—especially those who enjoy racial, ethnic, religious, gender or class privilege on a daily basis—must play their part to put an end to the racism, xenophobia and related intolerance that prevails today.

I thank you for your kind attention.