

18 March 2016

**Statement by H.E. Mr. Mogens Lykketoft,
President of the 70th Session of the General Assembly,
on the International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination**

Mr Secretary General, Excellencies, High Commissioner Zeid, Mr Ahmed Reid, Distinguished delegates, ladies and gentlemen,

You are all very welcome to this commemorative event to mark the International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination.

In 1966, the General Assembly decided that 21 March would be the day when the world pauses each year to reflect on the state of racial discrimination in our world.

They did so because it was on this day in 1960 that 69 unarmed and peaceful protestors were killed by apartheid regime police in Sharpeville, South Africa.

This year we are reflecting in particular on progress made during the 15 years since the Durban Declaration and Programme of Action was adopted.

And it is fair to say that the picture is very mixed.

On the whole, we have made progress including by eliminating much of the direct discrimination on the basis of race, colour or ethnicity.

But it is also true that the ignorance, prejudice and fear – that is often at the root of racial discrimination – continues to run deep right across the world.

Millions of people continue to be victims of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance, which have assumed contemporary forms and manifestations.

Disturbingly, in the past twelve months, we have also seen a rise in divisive political rhetoric and xenophobia in some parts of the world, particularly targeting refugees and migrants.

Democratic societies will of course always face tensions in terms of managing the interests of different groups, but tolerance, cultural diversity, responsible political leadership and inclusive governance are absolutely fundamental to protecting human rights and to ensuring that those tensions do not spill over into violence and conflict.

And while individuals, civil society, the UN and others all have important roles to play in countering racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance, ultimately each and every Member State bears primary responsibility for their prevention and elimination.

In particular, we must do more to live up to commitments under the International Convention on the Elimination of all forms of racial discrimination and under the Durban Declaration and Programme of Action.

This requires targeted and immediate actions but it must be sustained over time.

Indeed, from South Africa to the United States of America, it is clear that hard fought victories against oppressive systems are not enough to overcome the legacy of discrimination.

Eradicating institutional bias and changing both attitudes and outcomes is hard. It takes time and it takes commitment.

Indeed, the International Decade for People of African Descent 2015-2024 reminds us of the need to be vigilant and stay the course on these issues.

It seeks to address many of the lingering legacies of one of the greatest forms of racism and racial discrimination the world has ever seen.

And I am very pleased that we are jointed today by key-note speaker Mr. Ahmed Reid, member of the Working Group of Experts on People of African Descent of the Human Rights Council.

To conclude, ladies and gentlemen, let us remember all those who have suffered from racism over the years.

And let us honour them by working together and taking concrete action to prevent further cases of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance.

Thank you.