UN Photo/Eskinder Debebe - South Africa

OHCHR - Spain.

United Nations Efforts in Combating Racial Discrimination

The Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, the first treaty-monitoring body established by the United Nations, monitors and reviews actions by State parties to fulfil their obligations to eliminate all forms of racial discrimination. The other treaty-monitoring bodies also work to ensure that States parties respect the principle of non-discrimination, as affirmed in the core human rights treaties.

The Special Rapporteur on Contemporary Forms of Racism, Racial Discrimination and Xenophobia and Related Intolerance, an independent expert appointed by the Human Rights Council, transmits allegation letters or urgent appeals, information or case summaries concerning alleged violations, in order to induce the national authorities to investigate all the incidents or individual cases reported.

The World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance in 2001 adopted the Durban Declaration and Programme of Action, which provides a "road map" towards a world free from racial discrimination. The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), in 2002, established an Anti-Discrimination Unit. Its mandate includes substantive and secretariat support to the three follow-up mechanisms of the Durban Declaration and Programme of Action:

- The Working Group of Experts on People of African Descent
- The Intergovernmental Working Group on the Effective Implementation of the Durban Declaration and Programme of Action
- The Group of Independent Eminent Experts

The Anti-Discrimination Unit also compiles and analyses information on racism and discrimination, assists Member States to develop and implement anti-discrimination policies and laws, and helps Governments draw up and implement plans of actions and strategies to counter discrimination.

International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination

The International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination is observed annually on 21 March. On that day in 1960, police opened fire and killed 69 people and injured more than 300 people at a peaceful demonstration against apartheid laws in the township of Sharpeville, South Africa. In 1966, the United Nations General Assembly proclaimed 21 March as the International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination to commemorate the Sharpeville tragedy. 21 March has since served not only to remind the international community of the dire consequences of racism, but also to recall our obligation and determination to combat racial discrimination.

About OHCHR

The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) represents the world's commitment to universal ideals of human dignity. It has been given a unique mandate by the international community to promote and protect all human rights. Headed by the High Commissioner for Human Rights, a position established by the General Assembly in 1993 as the principal human rights official of the United Nations, OHCHR offers leadership, works objectively, educates and takes action to empower individuals and assist States in upholding human rights. Through its unique access, OHCHR works with and provides assistance to Governments to help promote and implement human rights worldwide. It also assists those with responsibility to fulfil their human rights obligations and individuals to realize their rights, and speaks out objectively in the face of human rights violations. Headquartered in Geneva, the Office is also present in over 40 countries. For more information, please visit www.ohchr.org

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UN Photo/Louise Gubb - South Africa.

Racism and Discrimination Obstacles to Development

International Day
for the Elimination
of Racial Discrimination
21 March 2007

OFFICE OF THE UNITED NATIONS
HIGH COMMISSIONER FOR HUMAN RIGHTS

Racism, whether expressed through subtle face-to-face interactions, outright aggressive and violent behaviour, or social exclusion and denial of access to opportunities, constitutes a major obstacle to development. Combating racism and other forms of discrimination should be an integral part of efforts to achieve the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) by 2015.

OHCHR - Cambodia

OHCHR - Australia

Racial Discrimination and Development

The principles of equality and non-discrimination are among the most fundamental elements of international human rights law. Racial discrimination is a violation of human rights. Prohibition of racial discrimination is a peremptory norm of international law from which no derogation is permitted. The obligation to fight racism is binding on all States, regardless of whether or not they have ratified the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD).

Development is a comprehensive economic, social, cultural and political process that aims at constantly improving the well-being of the entire population on the basis of everyone's active, free and meaningful participation and the fair distribution of the available resources. Racism and other forms of discrimination are not only human rights violations but also major obstacles to achieving development.

Such obstacles can be conflicts that stem from racial tensions and disrupt local, national and regional development, or the marginalization of vulnerable groups resulting in missed development opportunities. Racial discrimination and poverty often form a vicious cycle. Experience reveals that in many cases victims of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance are among the poorest.

Eliminating racial discrimination promotes social cohesion and development. Indeed, combating discrimination helps prevent conflicts and social unrest, and contributes to economic growth. Equality is fundamental to social harmony; it is essential for the promotion of good governance, sustainable development and the fair allocation of available resources. Equality and development reinforce each other.

Racism and Discrimination Aggravate Poverty

Fighting racism and discrimination is not a choice but an obligation. The Durban Declaration, adopted in 2001 during the World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance, acknowledges that poverty, marginalization, social exclusion and economic inequalities "contribute to the persistence of racist attitudes and practices which in turn generate more poverty."

As the international community, rich and poor countries alike, is striving to reach the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) by 2015, everyone should bear in mind that racism and all forms of discrimination are constantly putting back our achievements.

Millennium Development Goals

- Halve extreme poverty and hunger
- Achieve universal primary education
- Empower women and promote equality between women and men
- Reduce under-five mortality by two thirds
- Reduce maternal mortality by three quarters
- Reverse the spread of major diseases, especially HIV/AIDS and malaria
- Ensure environmental sustainability
- Create a global partnership for development, with targets for aid, trade and debt relief

Racism and Discrimination Breed Conflicts

Conflicts inevitably reverse development gains. According to the World Bank, 80 per cent of the world's 20 poorest countries have experienced an armed conflict in the past 15 years. It is estimated that for countries recovering from armed conflict, there is a 44 per cent chance of unrest breaking out again within the first five years. It can take a generation or more just to restore the pre-conflict living standards. During the 2001 World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance, the international community clearly recognized that racial discrimination was "among the root causes of armed conflict."

Racism and Discrimination Limit Economic Growth

People who are victims of discrimination, including racial discrimination, are marginalized in their societies and denied equal opportunities to reach their full potential and contribute to economic growth. A human rights-based approach to development empowers all people to contribute to economic growth and to share in its benefits.

Racism and Discrimination Hamper Good Governance

Economic growth is unachievable without good governance. Good governance is participatory, transparent, accountable, effective and equitable, and it promotes the rule of law. Good governance ensures that political, social, legal and economic priorities are based on broad consensus in society and that the voices of the poorest and the most vulnerable are heard. The active and informed participation by the poor in the formulation, implementation and monitoring of policies and laws is essential. Institutions should mirror, as the Durban Declaration states, "the multi-ethnic, pluricultural and plurilingual characteristics of the population."