

**Statement by Mr. Ivan Šimonović, Assistant Secretary-General for Human Rights,
at the Launch of the Decade for People of African Descent,
New York, 10 December 2014**

Your Excellency Mr. Sam Kahamba Kutesa, President of the General Assembly,
Deputy Secretary-General,
Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am pleased to be here today, to address you on behalf of the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, and on behalf of the High Commissioner himself.

On this day, 10 December, we commemorate Human Rights Day. This Day is an opportunity for all of us to commit, once again, to the enduring messages of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights adopted by this Assembly in 1948.

The launch of the Decade of People of African Descent, on this particular day, is symbolic. It is also an invitation to all of us, to place this important endeavour within the context the Declaration.

In a sense, it would be fitting to invite everyone to read again the entire Declaration, as some of us in this room -- Ambassadors, civil society actors, students, all led by the Deputy Secretary-General – did just that, yesterday at the Schomburg Center in Harlem.

The first article of the Declaration says, and I quote: “All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights.” Those simple and clear words must guide us. Indeed, Human rights and fundamental freedoms belong to us all, regardless of race, sex, religion, sexual orientation, disability, descent or age.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Recent events, including some close to us here in New York, serve as tragic reminders of the many human rights challenges facing people of African descent worldwide: racial discrimination, disproportionately high poverty and illiteracy rates, limited access to education and employment. Everywhere around the world, and on every day that passes, too many people of African descent are the victims of countless injustices, and human rights violations and abuses. And we cannot ignore the gender dimensions of the particular experiences of women of African descent, in many communities and countries.

This is why, during the next decade, we will shine a light on the violations and abuses facing people of African descent. The Decade is aimed at recognizing the realities of people of African descent from Harlem, to Salvador de Bahia, and to the Gonaïves. People of African descent in all regions of the world are facing discrimination in different, yet all too familiar ways.

Activities planned during the ten coming years will address issues of inequalities, invisibility, underdevelopment, discrimination, and violence faced and experienced by people of African descent on each and every continent.

The Programme of Activities of the Decade adopted by this General Assembly is built on three pillars: Recognition, Justice and Development for people of African descent.

Recognition is the first pillar of the Decade. The Programme calls on all actors to help increase the visibility of people of African descent, to help ensure that their cultural identities are respected, to acknowledge their contribution to society. It also calls for the adoption of anti-discrimination laws and policies, and for the collection of data collection on the human rights situation of people of African descent.

The need to achieve justice for people of African descent is the second pillar of the Decade. The Programme calls for a fight against impunity, including with regard to racial profiling; it calls for equal access to justice and equal protection of the law at all stages of judicial proceedings is to be ensured.

Development is the third thematic pillar of the Decade. Activities will promote the right to development, including through the elaboration of poverty eradication strategies, debt relief, and social and economic inclusion. The Programme will also promote equal access to education, health, employment and political participation for people of African descent.

The Programme of Activities calls on the international community to also reflect on the history, lessons and consequences of tragic chapters affecting people of African descent. The Decade for people of African descent presents an opportunity to focus anew on the racism faced by people of African descent and make progress towards eradicating it.

During this Decade and beyond, there is so much to be done by all the actors identified by the Programme of Activities – groups and communities, Governments, civil society, and the United Nations system.

It is a comprehensive Programme which will require our sustained commitment and joint efforts to fulfil. The expectations and aspirations of the many victims of racial discrimination call for it.

By deciding to launch this Decade, the General Assembly has responded to the civil society grassroots movements and the demands of people of African descent, which began over fifteen years ago during the preparations for the World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination and Related Intolerance, held in 2001 in Durban, South Africa.

The High Commissioner for Human Rights has been appointed to act as Coordinator of the Decade. His role is to follow up on the implementation of activities. He has been requested to increase and strengthen support for the relevant mechanisms of the Human Rights Council in combating racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance in the context of the Decade.

The Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights -- in close coordination with the Department of Public Information, UNESCO, and regional organizations -- will carry out an awareness-raising campaign. We will continue to strengthen our successful fellowship programme for people of African descent, and we will expand our anti-discrimination database to include a section on the activities of the Decade.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Today marks the beginning of a momentous commitment. As we look forward, we must take on the engagement that at the end of this Decade of People of African Descent, we will have reached the objectives we have identified.

As we progress towards those objectives, at key milestones, we will assess the implementation of the Decade, annually through the report of the Secretary-General, and through a mid-term review at five year mark. We will then do so, one final time, at the very end of the Decade.

During the Decade, let us make swift progress towards eradicating racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance against people of African descent. Let us be united to bring recognition, justice and development for people of African descent. Let us use this momentum to increase the protection and promotion of all human rights for all.

In that spirit, I extend to you the greetings of the High Commissioner for Human Rights on this Human Rights Day, and best wishes for an inspiring launch of the Decade on People of African descent.

Thank you.