

**Statement by H.E. Sam K. Kutesa, President of the 69th Session of
the United Nations General Assembly
at the Launch of the International Decade for People of African Descent**

10 December 2014, New York

Excellencies,

Distinguished Delegates,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am pleased to join you today as the United Nations officially launches the International Decade for People of African Descent.

I thank the South African delegation and, in particular, Ambassador Kingsley Mamabolo, the Permanent Representative of South Africa to the United Nations for his able leadership on this issue.

I wish to acknowledge the High Commissioner for Human Rights, who has been designated as the coordinator of the Decade. I also thank the representatives of the Durban mechanisms who are with us today, including the Working Group of Experts on People of African Descent and the Intergovernmental Working Group on the Effective Implementation of the Durban Declaration and Programme of Action (DDPA) for their work on the development of the programme of activities of the Decade and in support of implementation of the DDPA.

Several of us have just come from a pledging event for the Permanent Memorial to Honour the Victims of Slavery and the Transatlantic Slave Trade. The Permanent Memorial, titled, “The Ark of Return”, was designed by Rodney Leon, who is from Haiti and of African descent.

We are joined here today by Mr. Leon and I wish to congratulate him on this important accomplishment. The Permanent Memorial, which will be installed here on the grounds of the United Nations, will promote greater recognition of the contributions that enslaved Africans and their descendants have made to their respective societies.

Esteemed Colleagues,

The launch of the International Decade for People of African Descent is indeed a historic moment and a significant achievement. Human rights issues affecting people of African descent are present on every continent. Through the launch of this Decade, the General Assembly is signifying that issues affecting people of African descent are of worldwide concern, and not solely a problem of the Americas.

During this Decade and beyond, there is much to be done by a wide range of actors; including Governments, the United Nations system, civil society, communities and individuals. Through the effective observance of the Decade, we have been presented with an important opportunity to create synergy in the effort to combat racism, while also contributing to the implementation of the Durban Declaration and Programme of Action.

Today we are joined by many leaders who have committed their lives to the promotion and protection of all human rights and fundamental freedoms. These individuals have worked tirelessly to reaffirm the principles of equality and non-discrimination contained in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Over the next ten years, people everywhere are encouraged to take part in a global conversation on the realities faced by people of African descent. The Decade will allow us to explore the challenges faced by people of African descent due to pervasive racism and racial discrimination engrained in our societies.

The theme of the International Decade: “recognition, justice and development”, provides an excellent platform for that global conversation to take place. This theme has elements that I would like to focus on individually.

On the matter of recognition, in 2001, the international community adopted the Durban Declaration and Programme of Action (DDPA) at the World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance. The DDPA confirmed what we all know to be true; that people of African descent still suffer from residual consequences due to slavery, the slave trade and colonialism.

Furthermore, it was acknowledged that racism exists in all countries, in all regions; and that fighting racism must be an international priority. As we launch this International Decade, we must work to raise awareness and contribute toward ensuring the promotion, respect, protection and fulfilment of the human rights of people of African descent, as well as their full and equal participation in all aspects of society.

Thirteen years after Durban, it is imperative that effective actions at the national and regional levels contribute toward tangible improvements in the lives of millions of people of African descent around the world.

On the matter of justice, people of African descent are too often the victims of crime and violence, while facing discrimination in their attempts to seek legal redress. In many societies the problem is endemic. Access to justice must be based on equality and the effective implementation of national and international legal frameworks.

Activities undertaken through the Decade, including the provision of legal assistance to people of African descent who are victims of racism or discrimination will support the promotion and protection of the values of justice and equity.

On development, the international community has come to recognise the correlation between discrimination and poverty. Structural and institutional racism inherent in many societies has determined the level of social, economic and political advancement for many people of African descent. Despite the abundant and irrefutable evidence of the contributions of people of African descent to the development of our societies, too often they are marginalised and face stereotypes and stigma.

During the Decade, States are encouraged to take specific steps to alleviate and remedy disparities, while enabling people of African descent to overcome persistent, structural forms of discrimination.

Such measures would include revisiting policies and practices that have a negative impact on individuals and communities largely comprised of people of African descent.

The African Union attaches great importance to the issue of the African people in the diaspora. The AU has recognised African Diaspora as a component of the African continent and also encouraged all those of African descent to contribute to Africa's development. In this context, the AU held its first ever Global African Diaspora Summit in 2012 in South Africa as a bid to engage the African diaspora".

Ladies and Gentlemen,

As the General Assembly launches this International Decade, we are reaffirming the rights and freedoms enshrined in the Charter of the United Nations and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

This Decade is an opportunity to unite our voices and renew our political commitment to universal human rights and give new momentum to eliminating all forms of racism and racial discrimination against anyone, anywhere.

I thank you for your kind attention.