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Racism plagues every society – UN expert



Special Rapporteur Githu Muigai

1 November 2010 – Racism and xenophobia still ravage contemporary society and no state is immune to their effects, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance, Githu Muigai, said today.

“Racism and xenophobia are not yesterday’s problems; they remain an immense challenge for today,” Mr. Muigai said while presenting two reports to the UN General Assembly.

“Be it the member of an ethnic minority who is attacked or killed in the context of a conflict due to his or her minority status; the individual subjected to stop and searches, interrogations or arrests, solely because of his or her perceived religious or ethnic background; the migrant, the refugee or asylum-seeker who faces daily discrimination due to his or her status as a non-citizen; or the football player who is insulted because of his skin colour - all these people unfortunately demonstrate the validity of my statement,” he said.

Mr Muigai noted that no state is immune to extremist political parties, movements and groups, and warned that racism may lead to genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity.

“Relying on the dehumanization of the other, hate speech may indeed become an effective tool in times of conflict to incite people to commit acts of violence, including killings, against specific individuals or groups of individuals,” he said.

The Special Rapporteur warned in particular against “deeply marked tendencies to characterize migration as a problem and threat to social cohesion.”

“Migrants, refugees and asylum-seekers, regardless of their migration status, are entitled to have all their human rights protected by the State where they live without discrimination,” Muigai said. He urged States to ensure that migration policies are “at all times consistent with international human rights instruments.”

He called on states to be vigilant against extremist groups and to condemn and outlaw organizations and activities that promote or incite racial discrimination. He noted, however, that fighting racism requires more than the enactment of anti-discrimination laws.

“Overcoming racism also requires addressing public and private attitudes which justify and perpetuate racism at all levels and in all areas of life,” he said.

On the question of incitement to racial or religious hatred, Muigai stressed that “vigorously interrogating and criticizing religious doctrines and their teachings is thoroughly legitimate and constitutes a significant part of the exercise of the right to freedom of expression and freedom of religion.”

But he expressed concern about discrimination against individuals on the basis of their religion or belief; attacks on religious sites; religious and ethnic profiling; and negative stereotyping of religions, their followers, sacred persons, and symbols.

Mr. Muigai is a lawyer specialized in international human rights law. He was appointed by the Human Rights Council as a Special Rapporteur – reporting to that body as an unpaid, independent expert – beginning August 2008.

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