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On International Day, UN warns about link between racism and conflict



Racial or ethnic discrimination has been used to instill fear or hatred of others, often leading to conflict and war, as in the case of the Rwanda genocide in 1994. UN/J. Isaac

21 March 2012 –

Top United Nations officials warned today about the dangerous bond between racism and conflict, urging the international community to address grievances before they explode into catastrophic conflict.

“Racism and racial discrimination have been used as weapons to engender fear and hatred. In extreme cases, ruthless leaders instigate prejudice to incite genocide, war crimes and crimes

against humanity,” said [Secretary-General](#) Ban Ki-moon in his [message](#) marking this year’s International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, which focuses on the theme of racism and conflict.

On 21 March each year, the UN marks the day in 1960 when dozens of peaceful protesters were gunned down by police in the South African township of Sharpeville as they demonstrated against apartheid.

“Racism undermines peace, security, justice and social progress,” Mr. Ban added. “It is a violation of human rights that tears at individuals and rips apart the social fabric.”

The Secretary-General further noted that the UN was contributing to the global fight against racism by fostering inclusion, dialogue and respect for human right.

“Where societies have been shattered by conflict, the United Nations strives to promote peace processes and peacebuilding that foster inclusion, dialogue, reconciliation and human rights,” he stated.

In her [statement](#) to mark the Day, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Navi Pillay cited a survey which stated that 55 per cent of violent conflicts between 2007 and 2009 had violations of minority rights or ethnic tensions at their core. The relationship between racism and conflict was “a deep-rooted, well-established one,” she cautioned.

“Leaving the dangerous societal problems of prejudice and racism to simmer on the back burner creates a real risk of explosive conflicts erupting, years or decades later,” Ms. Pillay stated.

“Racism and prejudice can provide, propel, and perpetuate the narratives that create and sustain conflict – whether in the developed or developing world.”

Two UN experts in the fields of racism and minority issues have issued their own statement, stressing the need for greater attention to prevention and early action in response to the first warning signs of tensions caused by racism and discrimination that may lead to violence and conflict situation with serious violations of human rights.

“All relevant actors should pay attention to early warning signs, including the marginalization and social exclusion of specific groups of individuals; discriminatory legislation and policies; the persistence of racial prejudice and negative stereotypes; hate speech by public officials and the media; and violent attacks and harassment targeting ethnic groups,” said Mutuma Ruteere, the UN Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance.

Mr. Ruteere and Rita Izsák, the UN Independent Expert on minority issues, drew attention to the important role of non-State actors, including civil society, the media, national human rights institutions, and political parties, who can serve as “watchdogs” for discriminatory government policies and play an important role in the promotion of tolerance, mutual understanding and respect for diversity.

In addition to a new website, this year's drive to eliminate racism has also moved to the world of social networking, where the Organization has established a Facebook campaign with pages in English, French and Spanish and is encouraging followers to tweet their support against the scourge of intolerance.

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