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**Regional Meeting for
Latin America and the Caribbean
on the International Decade for People of African Descent**



**Opening Statement by
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United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights**

Brasilia, 3 December 2015

Excellencies,

Friends, Colleagues,

Ladies and gentlemen,

A good morning to you all. It is a great honour for me to be among all of you here today, to pay tribute in particular to the courage and resilience of people of African descent, who have been tirelessly pushing for decades to bring international visibility to the long-standing discrimination that millions of Afro-descendants around the world face daily. Let us also recognize Afro-descendant ancestors who have given great sacrifices over the centuries for freedom, equality, and human rights.

As I address this first Regional meeting under the International Decade for People of African Descent, I am struck by the enormity of the task before us. Ten years to reverse five centuries of structural discrimination? Racial discrimination that has deep roots grown in colonialism and slavery and which is nourished daily with fear,

poverty and violence, roots that aggressively infiltrate every aspect of life – from access to food and education to physical integrity, to participation in decisions that fundamentally affect one’s life.

A decade is such a short time.

The life of a child of African descent today in a barrio, favela, a pueblo joven, or in an Afro-descendant community, is predetermined to be marked by the colour of their skin even before they born.

Maternal mortality is generally higher among people of African - descent because of discrimination and unequal access to healthcare.

The child is likely to grow up in a household living below the poverty line, with insufficient clean water, electricity or sewage systems. They are unlikely to go to a good school, more likely to drop out and to end up with a low-wage job if any, in the informal sector, without any social security or benefits. The chances of this child reaching a position of political power are shamefully negligible – in 2009, a

mere 0.3 per cent of legislators in Latin America were women of African descent. Conversely, the likelihood of this child with age being subjected to brutal, even lethal violence, either in their own community or at the hands of the police or security forces, are much higher, and as are the chances of being incarcerated.

A dismal but tragically widespread experience – and the story may well have unfolded in virtually any Latin American or Caribbean country.

A decade therefore is such a short time.

A vast majority of the people of African descent in the Latin American and Caribbean region are the descendants of African men and women who were captured, sold into slavery and subjected to unspeakable horrors between the 16th and 19th centuries. With

abolition came freedom, but many of the deeply discriminatory social structures were never torn down, and the prejudices and preconceptions never recognized or confronted.

Today, there are more than 150 million people of African descent in Latin America and the Caribbean – about 30 per cent of the population. According to the most recent census in Brazil, half of the population of the country is Afro-descendant. Yet Afro-descendants throughout much of the region are almost invisible in the halls of power – economic, academic, professional or political, at local or national levels. In the Caribbean region where people of African descent are the majority or form the vast majority of the population and are visible in the political leadership, yet it is the people of European descent who tend to hold economic power. High rates of inequality persist throughout the region for people of African descent. In times of economic growth, Afro-descendants largely fail to reap the benefits; and in times of economic slowdown, they suffer the most, with the wealth gap only widening.

We can only deconstruct five centuries of structural racism and discrimination working together.

Implementing the Programme of Activities of the Decade can only be achieved through partnership and joint efforts taken by all of us - the United Nations, Member States, national human rights institutions, civil society and regional organizations - such as ECLAC, and CELAC, the Inter-American Bank and the Organization of American States.

For my part, and as Coordinator of the Decade, I will work with all our partners on implementing the Programme of Activities. My Office with the Department of Public Information and UNESCO is carrying out an awareness-raising campaign on the Decade. We will continue our successful fellowship programme for young people of African descent, some of whom are here today. We are undertaking thematic research to increase understanding about the nature and complexity of discrimination facing the people of African descent.

And there has been some progress. Over the past 15 years or so, many governments in the region have integrated protective measures for people of African descent into laws and constitutions. Several States now collect disaggregated statistical data on the demographics of Afro-descendants – this is an important first step in designing the right policies and programmes to tackle the issues that these communities face. Brazil has been implementing affirmative action policies for access to higher education since 2004, while Colombia has been promoting similar policies for political representation in parliament. Argentina, Bolivia, Colombia, Costa Rica and Mexico are among the countries that have adopted national action plans to combat racial discrimination. There have also been a number of welcome initiatives at the regional level, including the adoption of two conventions: the Inter-American Convention against Racism, Racial Discrimination and Related Intolerance and the Inter-American Convention against Discrimination. A Rapporteur on the rights of Afro-descendants has also been appointed as has a Working Group on the rights of people of African descent within the Inter-American system. The Community of Latin American and Caribbean States

(CELAC) has created an active Working Group for People of African Descent to increase their visibility and promote their rights. Indeed, in many ways, the Latin American and Caribbean region is leading the way in adopting laws and policies to promote the rights of people of African descent.

The International Decade for People of African Descent is an opportunity to push ahead such welcome reforms throughout the region, but also to robustly enforce the laws and implement the policies and programmes to bring tangible improvements to the lives of Afro-descendants. A decade is indeed a short time, but if we set concrete goals, we may well be able to make a transformative difference in the 10 decisive years of the life of that child from the favela, barrio or pueblo joven.

The efforts of many representatives of Afro-descendants who advocated for this Decade and who have succeeded in making the international community sit up, listen and get serious about tackling these issues shows what can and should be accomplished.

However, let's make it clear that it is the States which bear the primary responsibility to implement with urgency the commitments which they undertook under the Programme of Activities, adopted with the agreement of all Member States at the General Assembly a year ago. Taken with the Durban Declaration and Programme of Action and the various international human rights treaties ratified by the States of the region, particularly the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, which the 50th which anniversary we commemorate this year, the three themes for the Decade – Recognition, Justice and Development– and the Programme of Activities, provide a solid framework for action.

Recognition is about acknowledging and understanding, concretely, the extent and depth of racism and racial discrimination faced by people of African descent, through data collection and by involving them in public and political affairs. It is about making Afro-descendants and their history, culture and achievements visible in education curricula, in textbooks and in the cultural arena.

Recognition can include affirmative action measures in education, in political representation, and in both the public and private sector labour markets. Recognition also means sensitising State officials, including in the spheres of law enforcement and justice, to prevent racial profiling and police brutality. And it means ensuring just and adequate reparation and satisfaction for any damage as a result of such discrimination, as required by the Durban Declaration and Programme of Action.

In the sphere of **justice**, Afro-descendants have reported to the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights that even when they are victims of crimes, they do not lodge formal complaints to the police because they simply do not trust State institutions and they fear being re-victimized. The Commission describes Afro-descendants' "resignation as regards historical and endemic injustice". This is terribly unfortunate but unsurprising, given the disproportionate use of force against people of African descent, particularly young men; and their over-representation among the prison population; and the

endemic racial profiling and discrimination they face in encounters with law enforcement officials. Justice is about combatting impunity by promptly and transparently enforcing the law against police officers who use unjustified lethal force and disproportionate violence. States need to take measures to include equal access to justice and equal protection of the law at all stages of law enforcement.

Historically and in the present day, people of African descent have been major contributors to **development** and the prosperity of their societies and nations, but have been denied their fair share of the dividends. On the contrary, their human rights have been violated so that others may thrive. Development must aim at the improvement of the well-being of the entire population. For this to happen, women and men of African descent must be active partners in the design of development initiatives. There has been a historical neglect and lack of public investment in neighbourhoods and regions that are predominantly Afro-descendant. This needs to be reversed in

partnership with the communities. Reducing inequality is a key feature of the Sustainable Development Goals adopted by world leaders earlier this year, and the rights of people of African descent must also be viewed through this prism.

Ladies and gentlemen,

We entered the Decade for People of African Descent with such an immense burden of historical and contemporary injustices that it is difficult not to bow down under the weight of despair. But we have an opportunity here to help strengthen communities of African descent and with them to strengthen the stability, democracy, rule of law, governance, security and development of the entire Latin American and Caribbean region. Let us seize this chance to tap the untapped potential in hitherto invisible communities. Let us pledge to use these 10 years to turn a corner.

Let us keep a watchful eye and a guiding hand on that child from the Afro-descendant communities of the region: the newborn child who will be 10 years old as the International Decade comes to a close, to ensure that they grow up empowered by a quality education which will open up a world of opportunities to them, and that nothing is denied them because of their ancestry or the colour of their skin.

From the earliest age, human rights education should be infused throughout the program of every school: in policies, the training of teaching personnel, in curricula and textbooks which reflect the rich diversity of one's own country and the heroic and terrible truths about the past which must not be forgotten. Children – all children – also need to learn what racism, bigotry and chauvinism are, and the evil they can produce. They can learn to recognise their own biases and correct them. They should learn that they are neither exceptional nor inferior because of where they were born, how they look, the colour of their skin or the social class of their parents. They should learn that no one is intrinsically superior to his or her fellow human beings. The

impact on a child of a good education is irreversible and reverberates through the community, benefiting all of society. And surely, this we CAN and MUST achieve in a decade.

To build on this note of hope, allow me to borrow the incomparable words of Gabriel Garcia Marquez: [And I quote:] “Faced with this awesome reality that must have seemed a mere utopia through all of human time, we, the inventors of tales, who will believe anything, feel entitled to believe that it is not yet too late to engage in the creation of the opposite utopia. A new and sweeping utopia of life, where no one will be able to decide for others how they die, where love will prove true and happiness be possible, and where the races condemned to one hundred years of solitude will have, at last and forever, a second opportunity on earth.” [End of quote.]

I thank you very much for your attention.