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Advancement of racial justice and equality

Written statement* submitted by Maat for Peace, Development and Human Rights Association, a non- governmental organization with special consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement, which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[25 February 2022]

* Issued as received, in the language of submission only. The views expressed in the present document do not necessarily reflect the views of the United Nations or its officials.



Written Statement to the 27th session of the Advisory Committee

Preamble

1. Inequality and racial discrimination have several implications. Inequality can affect life expectancy and access to basic services, such as health care, education, water, and sanitation. In addition, they can detract from the human rights guaranteed to individuals, due to discrimination, abuse, and lack of access to justice. High levels of inequality reduce the chances of acquiring skills and undermine economic, social, and human development falters, and thus economic growth shrinks.

2. Inequality and racial discrimination can also create an atmosphere of fear, vulnerability, and insecurity, undermine trust in institutions and the government, increase discord and tensions in society, and provoke violence and conflicts. High levels of inequality in income and wealth and racial discrimination can exacerbate anti-immigrant tendencies and extremist forms of nationalism. Moreover, inequality also undermines the ability of individuals and societies to adapt to climate change and mitigate its effects. Therefore, the report addresses a number of themes, namely:

- Racial discrimination and inequality in the Middle East and North Africa
- The impact of racism and inequality on sustainable development goals
- Recommendations

I. Racial discrimination and inequality in the Middle East and North Africa

3. As to discrimination and inequality against women belonging to certain ethnicities or women in general, the situation of women and girls in the Middle East, North Africa, and the Arab States region remains troublesome. The pace of the gradual progress remains slow and does neither reflect the commitments made in the 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals nor address the challenges of the region. Despite the increasing laws, policies, and programs focusing on gender equality, the growing representation of women in government and national programs and the establishment of national women's mechanisms and other institutions that promote the rights and well-being of women and girls, discrimination against women belonging to certain ethnicities or origins remains in most countries in the Middle East, where most state policies put indigenous citizens in the first place without taking into account the rights of women belonging to other origins.

4. Although working conditions vary widely, these workers are particularly vulnerable to discrimination, exploitation, and abuse of all kinds including harassment and violence by employers, coercion by employment agencies, forced labor, low wages, and inadequate socialization. Wage discrimination is also common in many countries in Asia and the Middle East.

5. Regarding the conditions of immigrants: In the Middle East, racism is practiced by the dominant ethnic majority to inflict harm, discriminate against, and persecute those belonging to other ethnicities. Arab countries also systematically and deliberately prioritize the needs of their Arab, Asian, and Western citizens over the unskilled immigrants who make up the majority in many Middle Eastern countries.

6. Most Arab governments deliberately deprive skilled workers of their rights, precluding migrants from mid-profile progressions and subjecting them to additional fees on welfare and services free to most other residents. But, with many employers still willing to take in new workers, most migrants are undeterred and may simply survive without healthcare or fall into debilitating debt, for which no Gulf States offer protection and due to which workers remain tied to their employers. Meanwhile, the better pay and employer benefits enjoyed by many skilled Arab or Euro-American migrants insulate them from the

burden of additional fees or job restrictions, exacerbating the already disproportionate destitution of South Asian and African laborers.¹

7. For European expatriates moving to the Middle East, the difficulties of migration are superficial at best, but structural disadvantages, inhumane hours, and uninhabitable living conditions facilitate the systemic exploitation of Asian and African migrants. Even as Middle Eastern states began to reprioritize the employment of nationals and other Arabs, though, the kafala system remained in place, especially as many Arabs deemed the unskilled work—and by extension the darker-skinned laborers—under the system’s jurisdiction dirty and undesirable.²

8. In many ways, racially motivated discrimination in the Middle East resembles that of the United States. Black Middle Eastern citizens are often ostracized by their peers, mocked in popular culture, and derogated in everyday speech. By this transitive reasoning, certain nationalities, and consequently skin-tones, are equated with unskilled professions that are deemed undesirable while others are deemed admirable and valid. Even children are not impervious to its effects, as British and American expats are trusted and prioritized over their South Asian and African migrant counterparts in the classroom.³

9. It is estimated that 10 percent of children who drop out of schools in Iraq do so because of bullying, and for black children, the problem is particularly acute. Social issues for young people are deeper and more complex because many cannot understand why the discrimination they face is happening to them at all.⁴

10. The Middle East and North Africa region is both a source and destination for many migrant workers. The Gulf States have been attracting a growing number of Asian migrant labourers mainly in the areas of construction, domestic work and agriculture. Conversely, there is also a growing number of Northern Africans migrating to Europe in search of better work who are confronted by a growing hostility in those receiving countries. With such a diverse region in terms of social, cultural, and religious backgrounds, there are some forms of discrimination that require new policies and responses by the governments and employers in the region. Discrimination based on social origin, religion and ethnicity are still active in the region as well as discrimination experienced by those from the region seeking work outside their country of origin.⁵

11. Religious discrimination is often worse in societies where no freedom of religion exists or where a state religion tends to disadvantage or exclude other religions. In some Arab countries, for instance, non-Muslim migrant workers must refrain from public display of religious symbols such as Christian crosses or Hindu tilaka. Other forms of discrimination consist of job advertisements excluding applicants belonging to certain religious groups (Hindus in particular), or of preventing migrant workers from practising their religion openly. The situation of the Baha’i in the Islamic Republic of Iran has long been a subject of comment by both ILO and United Nations bodies.⁶

12. The COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated racial and ethnic discrimination in a large number of countries. Migrants everywhere have faced tightening immigration restrictions, more obstacles to healthcare, increased racism and worsening poverty. Higher COVID-19 mortality rates have been observed in ethnic/racial minorities in African and Asian countries. Structural racism has been implicated, operating, for example, through more crowded living

¹ Harvard International Review, A Tale of Two Nomads: Racism and Migrant Labor in the Middle East, Mar 2021, at: <https://2u.pw/aRXDD>

² Idem.

³ Idem.

⁴ Opinion, If it really wants to, Iraq can end racism against black citizens, Feb 2022, at: <https://2u.pw/tGfEe>

⁵ International Labour Organization, Discrimination at Work in the Middle East and North Africa, at: <https://2u.pw/oYchw>

⁶ Idem.

conditions and higher-risk occupations. In many Middle Eastern countries, good data are lacking and rates of infection are higher among ethnic minorities and slum dwellers.⁷

13. The phenomenon of xenophobia and racism is exacerbated by the tightening of restrictions on immigration and border controls. Migrants were thus exposed to several interacting factors that put them at risk of contracting COVID-19, which are often exacerbated by the high prevalence of pre-existing non-communicable diseases in some groups, poor refugee protection, and the already existing and exacerbating socio-economic gender inequality. In many countries, they find themselves omitted from public health responses due to a lack of comprehensiveness and a lack of government preparedness.⁸

14. With regard to people of African descent, they do not have equal access to medical care and are at higher risk of infection with coronavirus. People of African descent are more likely to die from COVID-19 than their peers. For those recovering from the effects of the virus, the cost of health care and the socio-economic impact of the pandemic threatens to push people of African descent into poverty, and thus the disproportionate health impact and massive loss of life for people of African descent, ethnic minorities and other marginalized and disadvantaged groups has been driven by decades of unequal health care and inadequate living conditions.

II. The impact of racism and inequality on the sustainable development goals

15. The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, which includes 17 goals, aims to create more peaceful, just, and sustainable societies, given that inequalities threaten long-term social and economic development and can generate violence, disease, and environmental degradation. SDG 10 is dedicated to reduce inequalities and reduce disparities in opportunity, income, and power.⁹

16. Among the targets of this goal is the abolition of discriminatory laws and policies, the improvement of the regulation of global financial markets, the facilitation of legal, safe and orderly migration, and the strengthening of participation in decision-making at the national and international levels. Between 2010 and 2016, the incomes of the poorest 40 percent of the population grew faster than those of the entire population in 60 out of 94 countries with data. This shows inequality is neither inevitable nor irreversible.¹⁰

17. Inequality takes many forms and varies greatly from one country to another. While SDG 10 and its targets provide a framework, the fight against inequality must be rooted in country contexts, economic imperatives, and political realities. There is no scope for a one-size-fits-all approach, and national policies and institutions matter. Raising awareness, broadening policy support, selecting and reprioritizing public expenditure targets to reduce inequality in empowerment and opportunity, reorienting tax and fiscal frameworks to reduce intergenerational income and wealth inequalities, and managing rapid technological change will remain critical to combating the scourge of inequality in all its forms and manifestations.

III. Recommendations/proposals to advance equality and reduce racial discrimination

18. In the context of this discussion on the extent of the phenomenon of racial discrimination and inequality in the Middle East region, Maat for Peace, Development, and Human Rights recommends the following:

⁷ Science Direct, Migration, ethnicity, racism and the COVID-19 pandemic: A conference marking the launch of a new Global Society, Nov 2021, at: <https://2u.pw/JIKzd>

⁸ Idem

⁹ UN, Inequality – Bridging the Divide, at: <https://2u.pw/OKWz4>

¹⁰ Idem

- Ending all forms of racial discrimination practiced against individuals, especially those belonging to religious, ethnic, and linguistic minority communities, including by imposing economic sanctions on countries that pursue such practices.
 - Establishing an international mechanism to monitor all forms of discriminatory and racist practices committed against individuals belonging to religious, ethnic, and linguistic minority communities in all countries of the world and bring the perpetrators to international justice.
 - The need to work to combat impunity for crimes of discrimination committed against women and girls in general, and indigenous women and girls in particular, and to provide effective means of reparation for women and girls who are victims of violence, including appropriate compensation.
 - The need to work on amending national legislation that contains discrimination or inequality against specific groups, in line with international conventions and charters.
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