

‘none of us is born to hate; intolerance is taught and can be untaught’,

Secretary-General says in message on day to eliminate discrimination

Following is the text of the message by UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan on the International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, 21 March:

On 21 March 1960, police in apartheid South Africa fired on a peaceful demonstration in Sharpeville protesting racially discriminatory laws. Dozens of protestors died, and many more were wounded. Today, we commemorate the anniversary of the Sharpeville massacre not only to remember the lives that were lost, but to draw attention to the broader suffering inflicted by racial discrimination worldwide.

The focus of this year’s commemoration, “Fighting Everyday Discrimination”, challenges us to take meaningful steps to fight commonplace discriminatory practices in our societies. We are all aware that many of man’s greatest atrocities have had racial underpinnings, but the collective toll inflicted by routine racism is frequently overlooked. Indeed, the edifices of humanity’s most horrific crimes have often been built on the foundations of banal bigotry.

From name-calling in schools to hiring and firing decisions in the workplace, from selective media or police coverage of crimes to unequal provision of Government services, the mistreatment of racial or ethnic groups not only abounds in our societies, but often passes unchallenged. That such everyday racism remains prevalent is undeniable. But for it to pass unchallenged is unconscionable.

We must not tolerate the creeping rot of routine discrimination. Nor can we resign ourselves to it as a regrettable attribute of human nature. None of us is born to hate. Intolerance is taught and can be untaught. Legal guarantees are a fundamental part of this fight. But education must be its vanguard. Education can foster awareness and cultivate tolerance. It should begin at home -- where, after all, many racist attitudes have their origin -- continue in school, and become integral to our public discourse. In this struggle against intolerance, citizens must simultaneously be teachers and students.

The United Nations, through its awareness programmes, international law-making and rights-monitoring roles, has an important part to play. But all of us need to join this battle. On this International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, let us reaffirm that ultimate success in this struggle rests with ordinary citizens speaking out against “ordinary” intolerance. It is they who must refuse to tolerate discriminatory acts in their daily lives. It is they who must ensure that there is nothing “everyday” about discrimination. And it is they who will benefit the most from communities built on rights and respect for all.

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