

# UNAIDS EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR REMARKS

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29 MARCH 2023, "TOWARDS ELIMINATING RACISM AND DISCRIMINATION AGAINST PEOPLE OF AFRICAN DESCENT", UNITED NATIONS HEADQUARTERS, NEW YORK

Your Excellency Nana Addo Akufo-Addo, President of the Republic of Ghana  
Excellency, United Nations Secretary-General,  
Excellency, Madam Deputy Secretary-General,  
Excellency, Ambassador Rattray, Chef de Cabinet,  
Excellency, Ms. Lachezara Stoeva, Permanent Representative of Bulgaria and  
President of ECOSOC,  
Excellencies, Heads of Principal Organs and Chairs of Regional Groups,  
Permanent Representatives and Permanent Observers to the United Nations  
in New York,  
Heads of Agencies, Funds and Programmes,  
Colleagues, UN staff members, here in this room and in remote locations,  
Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen,  
We are so honoured that H.E. Nana Addo Akufo-Addo, President of the  
Republic of Ghana, accepted our invitation to be a keynote speaker and is  
here with us.

Thank you.

It is our privilege to welcome you here today. We are proud to have you at  
our side, a statesman of high stature, an illustrious son of Ghana, a smart  
economist and diplomat, a great humanist and one of the most brilliant jurists  
in the history of the Ghana Bar. We welcome you here as a brother, an elder of  
our community of people of African descent and thank you for honouring us.  
On behalf of UNSAG, a group of senior UN officials of African descent, I have  
the privilege to introduce you to our gathering today.

My name is Winnie Byanyima. I am the Executive Director of the United  
Nations Joint Programme on AIDS (UNAIDS) and Co-chair of UNSAG. I also  
have next to me our co-chair of UNSAG Bernardo Mariano Junior, the UN  
Assistant Secretary-General, Chief Information Technology Officer. We  
welcome you.

Ghana has played a historic role in strengthening the consciousness of people  
of African descent and mobilising them against racism. Ghana paved the way  
in decolonisation.

Ghana provided support for liberation movements across Africa, welcomed  
heroes such as anti-apartheid writer Alfred Hutchinson, artists Hugh Masekela  
and Miriam Makeba, civil rights leader Stokely Carmichael from Trinidad and  
Tobago. Great thinkers like Edward du Bois. Great poets like Maya Angelo  
and many others. Frantz Fanon, freedom fighter and who was Algerian  
Liberation Front Ambassador. All this is etched in our memories.

Excellency, you are continuing Ghana's commitment to Pan-Africanism,  
embodied by its first President Kwame Nkrumah. Your declaration in 2019 of  
the "Year of Return", inviting the Global African family to a birth-right journey  
home, 400 years after the forceful removal of our kith and kin, is truly, truly  
remarkable.

Right from the beginning the United Nations recognized the importance of  
tackling racism and Member States committed early on an accountability  
mechanism by establishing in 1969 the Committee on the Elimination of Racial  
Discrimination (CERD). Did you know that it exists?

This is the oldest Member State treaty body of the United Nations. Even though it is not well known, this body quietly carries on its work under the leadership of Professor Verene Shepherd of Jamaica, who you'll hear from today.

The United Nations International Decade for People of African Descent ends in 2024, just next year. The Decade called for recognition, justice and development. Yet, as we are approaching its completion, racism in the world seems to be increasing, it's rising, it's manifested in acts of racial violence, racism in global policies, global institutions, global rules, such as rules of trade, finance and taxation. Racism is wired in there.

The data on racial injustice and inequality is clear and very concerning. Take just one example, in Brazil, every 23 minutes a young black Brazilian is murdered, and it is not only in Brazil that young black mostly men are overrepresented in prisons and mistreated by law enforcement. A painful reality we see across the globe in the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, just to name a few.

The global scourge of racism goes beyond police violence to policy violence, wired into the rules that I've just mentioned and traced back to over five centuries of slavery and colonialism and neocolonialism.

As Executive Director of UNAIDS, I saw and I spoke out against the inequality that we saw in access to life-saving vaccines during the COVID-19 pandemic, where TRIPS rules, trade rules allowed the monopolisation of that life-saving vaccine. This brought home painfully how far we still need to travel for our lives to be counted equally. Black and brown people in their countries round the world continue to die, lacking the vaccine, while stocks of it were hoarded in countries where rich people, white people, live.

So too is the debt situation plaguing African countries today and countries of people of African descent. The lack of an effective mechanism for debt resolution is pushing these countries to have to pay creditors rather than invest in essential resources for life-saving healthcare or education of children. There cannot be any prospect of achieving the Sustainable Development Goals without tackling systemic racial inequalities.

UNSAG came together in 2020, in response to the global outrage against racism after the killing of George Floyd. We work to advance the eradication of racial inequality and systemic racism here at the UN. In addition, we provide a platform to facilitate leaders from the African continent and the diaspora to articulate paths forward to a world free of racial injustice.

Distinguished Colleagues,  
Distinguished Ambassadors,  
Ladies and gentlemen,

Please join me in warmly welcoming H.E. Nana Addo Akufo-Addo, President of the Republic of Ghana, to help us articulate this vision and pathway forward.

We are here to listen to you.

Thank you.

