THE DEPUTY SECRETARY-GENERAL

REMARKS SPECIAL MEETING OF THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY
IN COMMEMORATION OF THE INTERNATIONAL DAY FOR THE
ELIMINATION OF RACIAL DISCRIMINATION

New York, 21 March 2014
Mr. President,
 Honourable Gay McDougall,
 Excellencies,
 Distinguished delegates,
 Ladies and gentlemen,

 I am honoured to share with you the message of
 Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon on this important meeting
 commemorating the International Day for the Elimination of
 Racial Discrimination.

 I applaud the General Assembly for its focus on the state
 of racial discrimination worldwide.

 The Secretary-General and I consider ending racism to be
 a priority for the United Nations every single day of the year.

 I hope you will allow me to offer a few of my own thoughts
 on this important subject – but first the message of the
 Secretary-General:
 And I quote:
“This year, the world commemorates the International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination for the first time following the death of former South African President Nelson Mandela.

“This sad reality is also a reminder of his courageous struggle against apartheid and his inspiring victory over the racist forces that had imprisoned him for 27 years.

“The United Nations General Assembly, in a show of solidarity with the anti-apartheid movement, established this Day to commemorate the 1960 Sharpeville Massacre, when 69 people were killed and many others injured as police opened fire on a peaceful protest against South Africa’s appalling pass laws.

“Nelson Mandela’s journey from prisoner to President was the triumph of an extraordinary individual against the forces of hate, ignorance and fear – and it was a testimony to the power of courage, reconciliation and forgiveness to overcome the injustice of racial discrimination.
“He chose Sharpeville for the historic signing of South Africa’s new Constitution in 1996. On that occasion, President Mandela said, “Out of the many Sharpevilles which haunt our history was born the unshakeable determination that respect for human life, liberty and well-being must be enshrined as rights beyond the power of any force to diminish.”

“Today, we remember Sharpeville as a symbol of the terrible toll of racial discrimination, and we honour those who lost their lives during the massacre. At the same time, we recall that President Mandela framed Sharpeville’s legacy as an unwavering resolve to protect the dignity and rights of all people.

“The lessons of South Africa’s staunch defence of equality “out of the many Sharpevilles” in the country’s history can be applied anywhere in the world, not only in response to organized, institutional forms of racism but wherever this pernicious problem occurs, including in daily interpersonal relations.
“I call on all people, especially political, civic and religious leaders, to strongly condemn messages and ideas based on racism, racial superiority or hatred as well as those that incite racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance. On this Day, let us acknowledge that racial discrimination remains a dangerous threat and resolve to tackle it through dialogue inspired by the proven ability of individuals to respect, protect and defend our rich diversity as one human family.”

This concludes the Secretary-General’s message.

Mr. President,

Since the Sharpeville massacre, the United Nations has steered many powerful efforts to prevent and combat racism and racial discrimination.

At the same time, we honour those who have fought discrimination, and we commemorate the victims of appalling historical injustices. On this point, I commend the work of the Permanent Memorial Committee established to carry out the initiative for a Permanent Memorial for the Victims of the
Transatlantic Slave Trade at UN headquarters. I urge full support to the realisation of this meaningful vision of “Forever Free”. We must remember the terrible price that is exacted when we discount everyone’s equal value.

But still today, this violation of a fundamental human right continues to undermine the dignity, the well-being and even the physical safety too many people in our world.

Racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and intolerance are on the rise in communities across the world. We see violent attacks, incitements to hatred and hate speech against people of different ethnicities or perceived races.

It is a collective responsibility, but primarily that of States, to address racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance before these problems explode into open conflict.

All parts of the United Nations system must join forces for the greatest possible impact. I am pleased that the United Nations Network on Racial Discrimination and Protection of Minorities
brings together over 20 United Nations entities in an important common cause.

The decision of the General Assembly to announce the International Decade for People of African Descent is testimony to our collective resolve to unite against racial discrimination. Next month, the work will begin to draft the programme for the Decade, which is set to start in 2015. This Decade is an important opportunity for the world to come together and promote equality for people of African descent, as well as contribute to development, social justice and inclusion.

Ladies and gentlemen,

We are fortunate to have the opportunity to hear today from Ms. Gay McDougall, who has dedicated her career to ending discrimination. Over the years, she has provided a great deal of professional advice to the United Nations. We are deeply grateful for her invaluable work.

At one meeting here, she said, "Within the chambers of the United Nations the tragedy of racism is often described in
broad and at times impersonal terms. But the reality can be found in countless personal tragedies and struggles faced every day by individuals, families and communities in every country."

As we discuss international efforts to address racial discrimination, we must never forget that ultimately this is a scourge that strikes at the dignity and rights of individuals – and this tears at the fabric of our societies.

Let us resolve to speak out against racial discrimination in all forms, large and small. Let us denounce all slurs, discriminatory practices and attacks in our loudest voices. And let us together build a world of true equality.

Thank you.