

Mr. President,
Secretary-General,
Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

In an effort to continue to focus on the conditions of people of African descent, the United Nations has declared the year 2011 as the “International Year for people of African descent.”

Why another year? Why, precisely, a year for people of African descent?

When I was a little girl, my father used to tell me the story of Bash Chelik. This was a man who could not die because his life force was hidden away in a bird that was in the heart of a fox that lived in a cave hidden in a distant mountain.

Recently, I heard that the term race and racism should not be used. The justification is that there is only one human race and the use of the term race and racism perpetuates the problem. It was suggested that we would make significant progress toward eliminating the problems of prejudice if we avoid the use of that term.

This sounds very appealing and in accordance with the concept of all human rights for all. It makes people feel uncomfortable when linking certain terms with belonging to a specific race.

However, if we start to analyse this idea and ask questions, we suddenly find ourselves considering Bash Chelik and his painstakingly hidden life force.

The social construct of race exists even if genetics suggests the contrary. The problem of racism is connected with privilege and power related to race. I think that eliminating the words for the different races will not result in less discrimination or prejudice.

The source of discrimination against people of African descent is even more difficult to locate than Bash Chelik’s life force. It is hidden in an enormous heap of prejudices, which lie at the heart of stereotypes, screened by the contemporary definition of culture and divided into the different spheres of everyday life. That's why we need to tell, once more, the story of people of African descent.

The Working Group of Experts on People of African Descent proposed to mark the year under the title “People of African Descent: Recognition, Justice, and Development”.

This is the year in which we need to bring up the issue of recognising the role of people of African descent in global development and to bring up the issue of justice for current and past acts of discrimination that have led to the situation today. We need to talk about the past and present racial hierarchy that exists in societies and to encourage countries to become involved in development through positive action that will ensure equality for people of African descent. This year should be used to propose far more intensive measures for eliminating, or at least seriously reducing, structural discrimination. It means having the courage to discuss some banned topics, such as measures based on a policy of redistribution of resources according to a compensatory formula, sometimes viewed as reparations for past discrimination, or to contemplate the possibility for large-scale social therapy and healing projects.

This is the year, in other words, when we should at least try to discover Bash Chelik's cave, because at the moment we only know the mountain.

To accomplish such a move there is a need for a concentration of activities that we expect will happen during the year 2011 through the active participation and support of the international community, countries, institutions, non-governmental organisations and individuals.

And it must not end there. The search for the source of discrimination against people of African descent is in its infancy. It will take a lot of will power, endurance, knowledge and skill to solve the mystery of the modern day Bash Chelik. This journey will take not one year, not two years, but at least a decade of concentrated and persistent work.

Thank you for your attention.