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**Human Rights Council Advisory Committee**

**Twenty-fifth session**

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**Opening remarks by**

**Mr. Eric Tistounet**

**Chief**

**Human Rights Council Branch**

**Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights**

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Palais des Nations, room XX

Mme. La Présidente du Conseil des Droits de l’Homme,

M. Le Président du comité consultatif,

Distingués membres du Comité,

Excellences,

Mesdames, Messieurs,

J’ai l’honneur et le plaisir de vous accueillir ici aujourd'hui à l’ouverture de cette vingt-cinquième session du Comité Consultatif du Conseil des Droits de l’Homme. J’aimerais tout d’abord me joindre à la Présidente du Conseil pour féliciter les nouveaux membres :   
**M.** **Baek**, **Mme.** **Bernoussi**, **Mme.** **Sasnal** et **Mme. Van de Heyning** pour leur élection, ainsi que **M. Malhotra, Mme. Salmón** et **M. Seetulsingh**, pour leur réélection.

Alors que vous vous apprêtez à commencer cette 25ème session du Comité, je voudrais avant tout vous remercier pour votre flexibilité et votre disponibilité à continuer vos travaux en dépit des circonstances actuelles difficiles, et malgré les différentes plages horaires auxquelles vous vous connectez à cette réunion. Je suis désolé au nom du Secrétariat pour les difficultés qui ont entravé le début de la présente session. Il s'agit de circonstances indépendantes de notre volonté, bien entendu, et je pense en particulier à ceux d'entre vous qui s'élevaient à plusieurs milliers de kilomètres, pour qui il est très tard dans la soirée. Nous regrettons vivement ce qui s’est passé.

Distingués membres,

La Présidente du Conseil des droits de l’homme vient de dresser un tableau des activités du Conseil que je voudrais compléter, en attirant votre attention sur certains développements au sein des Nations Unies et du bureau du HCDH qui peuvent être d’actualité concernant les activités ainsi que les priorités de votre Comité.

**[Current mandates]**

Distinguished Members,

The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated alarming levels of poverty and inequalities, with the economic and human cost of the pandemic being much higher for those individuals and groups, who have consistently faced exclusion, marginalization and discrimination – in particular people of African descent, those from ethnic, national or religious minorities, indigenous peoples and migrants. Over the past year, the poor have become poorer, and those suffering systemic discrimination have fared worst of all. Now, more than ever, there is a need to redouble efforts to ensure that, in the COVID-19 recovery phase those communities are not forgotten and are placed at the front.

One of the mandates your Committee is currently working on is indeed very topical and relates to the **situation regarding racial equality in the world**. The President has just mentioned the urgent debate convened by the Council in June 2020, following the killing of George Floyd and the worldwide protests in that regard, which brought racial injustice and police brutality sharply into focus last year. As the Deputy Secretary-General participating in the debate had underscored, widespread racism against Africans and people of African descent are inextricably linked with generational cycles of inequality and poverty, and unfair obstacles to the right to development. In implementation of the resolution adopted by the Council, which requested a report by the High Commissioner on the issue, the Office has therefore held a series of regional consultations to collect information for the report. Participants in those consultations highlighted concerns related to violence by law enforcement against persons of African descent, racial profiling, intersecting forms of discrimination and the legacy of colonialism.

Furthermore, I am pleased to inform you that on 20 January, the UNSDG Task Team on Leave no one behind and Human Rights, which is co-chaired by OHCHR, WHO and UNESCO, organized an event entitled the “**Frontier Dialogue on addressing structural racial and ethnicity-based discrimination through COVID-19 Recovery Plans**. The event explored key opportunities for COVID-19 Recovery Plans to address structural discrimination based on race, ethnicity and related inequalities, leveraging the different areas of expertise, networks and operational reach of the UN system. The process benefitted from contributions from across the Office and the participation of several Special Rapporteurs and the vice-chair of CERD.  The Outcome Report will be a resource for the UN system in particular at country level to address structural racial and ethnicity-based discrimination.

**[Gender equality]**

Ladies and gentlemen,

2020 marked the twenty-fifth anniversary of the adoption of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action. However, as rightly noted by the Secretary-General, “*Twenty-five years since the adoption of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, progress towards equal power and equal rights for women remains elusive. No country has achieved gender equality*”. While it is true that some progress has been made, major gaps remain, and for this reason, gender equality is now a priority for the UN in the decade of action for sustainable development. It is noteworthy that the impact of COVID-19 on women has been particularly devastating. Not only have we seen an increase in domestic violence all across the world in 2020, but also given that a large proportion of women work in the informal sector and in health care, many were left with no choice but to withdraw from the labour market in order to care for children who could no longer go to school, for older people and for the sick. The High Commissioner has warned that in some areas, women’s rights risk being set back decades and that if we are to recover better, women will need to play a much greater role in decision-making and priority-setting. She has further underscored that “*it is no coincidence that in a world where so few countries have women leaders, several of the countries viewed as having handled the pandemic most effectively were in fact led by women*.”

This brings me to your study on **current levels of** **women’s representation in UN human rights bodies and mechanisms**. You may recall that upon taking office, the Secretary-General had made a commitment to reach parity at the senior leadership level, by the end of 2021, and parity across the Organization ‘well before 2030’. In January 2017, a Gender Parity Task Force was established to come up with a clear roadmap, with benchmarks and timeframes, to achieve parity across the system. Four years later, I am pleased to share with you some statistics in that regard. We achieved gender parity in the leadership of the UN at the beginning of 2020, with 90 women and 90 men as full-time senior leaders. We also have parity among the UN Resident Coordinators, including in countries affected by conflict. As far as OHCHR is concerned, we have a 100 per cent female leadership at USG and ASG levels. I am equally pleased to say that since its establishment, it is the first time that we have a strong representation of women in the Council’s Bureau – alongside the President, we have two other female Vice-Presidents in the Bureau this year. And I join the President in noticing that your Committee has also made considerable progress in terms of gender representation. These are all very positive trends indeed. We therefore look forward with much interest to the report of your Committee on this topic, which we are confident will provide critical recommendations and good practices by States in nominating, electing and appointing candidates to ensure balanced gender representation in UN organs and bodies.

**[New and emerging digital technologies]**

Another topic on which your Committee will be finalizing its report is that of the **impact of new and emerging digital technologies on human rights**. New technologies are undoubtedly changing our world in unparalleled speed and scale, with huge impacts on human lives and rights. COVID-19 has further accelerated this digital shift in all spheres of our lives – for employees, telecommuting has now become the rule, students all over the world have had their education move online and our social interaction has also become mostly digital. Since last year, travel bans and in-person restrictions related to COVID-19 have thus affected the work of human rights mechanisms and revealed an urgent need for a “digital transformation” in order to avoid a protection gap. OHCHR and the UN in general have had to adapt their working methods and embrace the digital shift in order to ensure remote support and engagement for staff and stakeholders in the context of the work of human rights mechanisms. The digital revolution has indeed made it possible for us to meet today. Against this background, I am pleased to inform you that on 4 February, the Committee on the Rights of the Child adopted its draft General Comment 25 dedicated to children’s rights in the digital environment, which provides an overview of how the Convention on the Rights of the Child in its entirety needs to be understood and implemented in relation to the digital environment. I am also pleased to inform you that in December 2020, a three-year joint effort by OHCHR and Berkeley’s Human Rights Centre culminated in the first international protocol on the use of digital information as evidence of human rights violations in international criminal and human rights investigations.

However, despite these groundbreaking advances in the field of digital technologies, the stark reality is that the digital divide is still considerable, and new risks keep emerging. The inequality crisis exposed by COVID-19 is mirrored online. Around 47% of the world population remains offline - among them, being connected is even harder for women, people living in poverty in developing countries and those living in rural areas. Also, we have seen how mass surveillance using digital technologies is on the rise, thus threatening online privacy and freedom of expression, while organized disinformation campaigns have disrupted elections. There is indeed a growing concern over the use or misuse of personal data, and the impacts on individuals, societies and democracies, in addition to built-in biases in automated systems that often impact on minorities. The High Commissioner has time and again highlighted that the accessibility to digital spaces and the ways in which these spaces are managed deeply impact on civil and political rights, but are also crucial for economic and social rights, and responding to hate speech or other online hostilities while defending free speech and protecting ourselves from surveillance are legitimate and pressing concerns. Your report on new and emerging technologies therefore bears all its importance and is much awaited in the present context of the COVID-19 pandemic. We look forward to reading the recommendations therein with much interest.

**[Integration of the perspective of persons with disabilities]**

Distinguished Members of the Committee,

When conducting your studies you are called upon to integrate the perspective of persons with disabilities in your reports. Persons with disabilities are indeed important agents of change and development. In this regard, you may be interested to know that in the past four years, Office has been active in the design of a disability-inclusive development agenda. The Office has developed an SDG-CRPD resource package, which includes goal-by-goal policy guidelines for policymakers to ensure disability inclusion in the work to achieve the SDGs, training materials and human rights indicators to support SDG implementation and monitoring, guided by the Convention.

Another tool that may be of interest to you in your work is the renewed **Universal Human Rights Index (UHRI)**, which now has enhanced group/theme/SDG search functionalities for faster and easier access to recommendations from key human rights mechanisms. The Index now allows users to gain insights into human rights trends that impact their efforts. For Member States implementing recommendations, rights holders advocating for change, or UN agencies, academics, professionals and the public seeking data, the UHRI is a tool for empowered analysis and action.

Distinguished Members,

As OHCHR continues to work towards the advancement of human rights for all and in all parts of the world and build back better in the current context of the COVID-19 pandemic, we are glad to be able to count on your expertise and on the important work carried out by your Committee. Let me conclude here by assuring you the full support of the Secretariat for your activities. I wish you very fruitful deliberations at the present session.

Thank you.

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