

Regional Launch of the Second International Decade for People of African Descent in the Asia Pacific Region

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Excellencies, Honoured Representatives, Partners in Justice, and People of African Descent across Asia and the Pacific—descendants of resilience, pride, and enduring power

Today we gather not solely to commemorate the launch of the Second Decade of People of African Descent in Asia and the Pacific but to ignite a future shaped by justice, inclusion, and equity. This is a moment not merely to remember, but to act. I address you from the unceded lands of the Ngannawal and Ngambri peoples, known to many as Canberra, Australia, a place that echoes with the spirit of sovereignty and resistance.

My remarks travel a path shaped by history and hope. In my remarks, I will explore the historical legacies and enduring exclusions of Afro-descended communities across South Asia, the region of my birth. Then, I will draw on cases from Southeast and East Asia, informed by the research and engagement of the Working Group. Finally, I will speak to the mandate of the Working Group and its deepening roots in the Asia-Pacific, as we move into a new era of human rights-centred dialogue.

Historical Legacies, Contemporary Exclusion, and Human Rights Imperatives

People of African descent in South Asia including the Siddis in India, Sheedis in Pakistan, and Kaffirs in Sri Lanka have long endured compounded forms of racial discrimination, social exclusion, and structural violence. Despite centuries of rooted presence and profound cultural contributions, they continue to be treated as perpetual outsiders. This manifests as exclusion from quality education, decent employment, adequate housing, health services, and full participation in public life.

This systemic marginalisation is not incidental; it is structurally embedded and historically reinforced. It arises from the convergence of multiple oppressive hierarchies, colonial racial ideology, caste discrimination, economic disenfranchisement, and post-independence institutional neglect. European colonial powers, particularly the Portuguese and British, forcibly transported Africans to South Asia as enslaved persons, soldiers, sailors, and bonded laborers. This history created a racialised caste that was both hyper-visible and politically invisible. These colonial legacies remain intact in the form of colourism, social stratification, and state inaction.

The persistence of inequality today reflects not just historical oversight but an active failure of both national legal systems and international human rights frameworks to ensure substantive equality and restorative justice.

India: Siddi Communities

The Siddis, descendants of East African Bantu peoples have lived in India for over 800 years, yet they occupy the margins of both geography and society. Predominantly residing in rural pockets of Karnataka, Gujarat, and Maharashtra, Siddis face chronic underdevelopment, limited access to infrastructure, and widespread economic precarity. While recognition as a Scheduled Tribe in certain states offers some formal protections, in practice, Siddis continue to face racial slurs, social exclusion, and constrained socioeconomic mobility.

This disjuncture between legal rights and lived realities exposes the limitations of protective legislation when not coupled with anti-racist education, proactive inclusion policies, and reparative investment. These ongoing inequities also undermine India's constitutional guarantees under Articles 14, 15, and 16, as well as its obligations under international instruments like the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD) and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR).

Pakistan: Afro-Sheedi Identity and Invisibility

The Sheedis in Pakistan are descendants of enslaved Africans brought by Arab and Portuguese traders. They are largely concentrated in the coastal regions of Sindh and Karachi's Lyari district. Despite their historic presence and cultural vitality, Sheedis endure systemic neglect, generational poverty, and deeply entrenched colorism that permeates every sphere of public life. Unlike India, Pakistan lacks specific legal recognition or affirmative action frameworks for Afro-Pakistani populations. Article 25 of the Constitution provides general equality before the law, but without concrete enforcement mechanisms or targeted anti-discrimination policies, it remains aspirational for people of African descent and other marginalised communities.

Tanzeela Qambrani's election to the Sindh Assembly marked a historic rupture in this invisibility, amplifying Afro-Pakistani issues on national platforms. Her presence, along with cultural revitalisation events like the Sheedi Melan signals a broader awakening of Black political identity and solidarity in Pakistan. Yet such advances remain fragile without structural transformation.

Sri Lanka: Kaffir Cultural Erasure

Afro-Sri Lankans, often referred to as 'Kaffirs' descend from African soldiers and laborers brought by Portuguese colonizers in the 16th century. Today, they face not just marginalisation but near cultural extinction. Their language, music, and oral histories-

once vibrant are on the brink of erasure, exacerbated by a lack of ethnic recognition and inclusion in census data or policy protections. This institutional erasure renders Afro-Sri Lankans statistically invisible and politically irrelevant.

Sri Lanka's obligations under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and ICERD demand proactive protection of ethnic and linguistic minorities. However, without legal recognition, Afro-Sri Lankans fall outside the scope of minority rights frameworks, perpetuating their cultural displacement and socio-political exclusion.

Toward Justice and Recognition

It is important to note, across South Asia, people of African descent are neither static nor voiceless. They are creators of knowledge, stewards of heritage, and agents of change. Grassroots organising has emerged as a key force in demanding justice, preserving culture, and asserting political agency.

In India, the Siddi Development Society champions land rights and literacy, while figures like Padma Shri awardee Hirbai Ibrahim Lobi embody the transformative leadership of Afro-descendant women. In Pakistan, Tanzeela Qambrani's legislative activism and the revival of Sheedi cultural practices reflect a growing intersection between cultural resilience and political engagement. In Sri Lanka, musicians and elders are working to revive Kaffringna traditions, rebuild oral histories, and pass intergenerational knowledge—efforts critical to resisting cultural annihilation.

These communities remind us that anti-Black racism in South Asia is both historically entrenched and presently urgent. The struggle for visibility, justice, and reparative inclusion must be at the forefront of national and regional human rights agendas. Recognising the full dignity, agency, and contributions of people of African descent is not just overdue, it is essential to the democratic and multicultural futures these nations aspire to build.

Constructing Belonging in Racialised Spaces

Across East and Southeast Asia, the presence and visibility of people of African descent is reshaping long held narratives of belonging. This is not merely a demographic trend. It is a political and cultural intervention that demands recognition and justice.

In Malaysia, African migrants, many of whom are students and professionals, navigate a precarious terrain shaped by racial profiling, media sensationalism and public suspicion. The absence of legal safeguards and accurate demographic data renders their struggles invisible to policymakers and public discourse. Yet despite this erasure, these communities are actively constructing spaces of belonging through cultural forums, mutual support networks and public advocacy. Their resilience signals both the urgency of inclusive policy and the creative power of grassroots solidarity.

In Japan, the enduring myth of ethnic homogeneity is being disrupted by the lived realities of Afro-Japanese youth. Cultural figures such as Naomi Osaka and Ariana Miyamoto have ignited national debates around race, citizenship and identity. However, symbolic visibility has not translated into structural inclusion. Afro-Japanese communities remain underrepresented in official data and absent from anti-discrimination policies. Without institutional reforms, the idea of inclusion remains aspirational.

In the Philippines, the Aeta, one of the archipelago's Indigenous peoples, occupy a distinct space at the intersection of racialisation and indigeneity. Often stereotyped based on phenotype and systematically excluded from land rights and public services, their experience highlights how African descent intersects with Indigenous identity to deepen marginalisation. Their struggle is not just for survival, but for sovereignty, cultural revival and political autonomy.

The Data Gap and Policy Silence

A recurring theme across the region is the absence of disaggregated data and policy recognition. People of African descent are routinely excluded from census categories, anti-discrimination strategies and representation in decision-making institutions. This data invisibility is not benign. It conceals racial inequities and undermines the very tools needed to dismantle them.

Recognition must begin with visibility. Governments across Asia must invest in mechanisms to document, consult and protect people of African descent and racially marginalised populations. Disaggregated data is not an administrative luxury. It is a foundation for equitable policy and rights-based governance.

Racialised Exploitation: Scam Centres and Human Trafficking

Yet inclusion cannot be addressed without reckoning with a darker undercurrent: the exploitation of African migrants within transnational trafficking networks. In the Philippines, Laos, Cambodia and Myanmar, hundreds of Ethiopians and other African nationals have been trafficked into scam centres, held in inhumane conditions and coerced into cyber fraud operations under threat of torture and death. These crimes reveal a broader pattern of racialised vulnerability. African migrants are specifically targeted because they are undocumented, unprotected and overlooked by local authorities and international law.

This is not only a criminal justice issue. It is a human rights failure. Governments and international actors must treat these abuses as structural, not incidental. Legal accountability must be enforced across borders for trafficking networks. Survivors must be provided with accessible legal aid and trauma-informed care. Diplomatic protection and migration pathways must be ensured for African nationals at risk.

This crisis illustrates that justice must extend beyond the borders of citizenship. It must include all who are made vulnerable by systems of race, power and exclusion.

Trust Beyond Economic Relationships and Trade

Even within state-to-state diplomacy, racial justice cannot be sidelined. In China, the experiences of African nationals, from students to small business owners, reveal structural challenges obscured by the rhetoric of Global South solidarity. The events in Guangzhou during the COVID-19 pandemic, where Africans were subjected to forced quarantines, evictions and denial of services, surfaced deep-seated racial biases within local enforcement mechanisms and public discourse.

While some corrective measures have been implemented, true reform must go beyond ad hoc responses. A sustainable China–Africa partnership must rest on mutual accountability. This includes formalised channels for civil society consultation and human rights dialogue, stronger consular services and legal protections for African nationals, and transparent data and monitoring systems to track and address racial discrimination.

Diplomacy must reflect not only economic metrics but lived human experiences. Partnerships that overlook racial injustice undermine both credibility and sustainability.

Recommendations for Justice and Inclusion

As emphasised in WGEPAD reports and statements, to promote equity and justice for people of African descent, several key recommendations should be pursued. First, states must improve data visibility by collecting ethnicity-disaggregated data on education, health, employment and housing outcomes, as outlined in General Recommendation 34 of the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD). Second, robust legal protections should be enacted and implemented through comprehensive anti-discrimination legislation that explicitly addresses racial, ethnic and descent-based discrimination with effective monitoring, enforcement and redress mechanisms. Third, people of African descent should be formally recognised in national constitutions and census instruments with guarantees for their full and meaningful participation in public decision-making. Fourth, there should be targeted support for community-led initiatives including education, cultural preservation and empowerment programmes, particularly those spearheaded by Siddis, Sheedis and Kaffirs. Finally, to ensure accountability and foster international oversight, states must address the circumstances of people of African descent in periodic reports submitted to UN treaty bodies and the Human Rights Council and must act on the recommendations made by the Working Group of Experts on People of African Descent (WGEPAD) during country visits and consultations.

Together, these measures not only affirm the rights and dignity of people of African descent but also lay a foundation for inclusive societies that recognise, value and actively uplift historically marginalised communities in Asia.

Conclusion

Colleagues and allies,

Established in 2002 by the Commission on Human Rights, the Working Group of Experts on People of African Descent (WGEPAD) is a Special Procedure of the Human Rights Council. It is charged with studying the global human rights situation of people of African descent and recommending measures to eliminate racial discrimination.

The Working Group plays a crucial role in implementing the Durban Declaration and Programme of Action, and it is central to the vision of the International Decade for People of African Descent (2015–2024), now extended into a Second Decade.

In our 2023 report to the Human Rights Council (A/HRC/54/71), we have reflected on 20 years of work, highlighting its impact in shaping discourse, advancing justice, and building global awareness. The report calls for greater institutional support, sustained political will, and intersectional strategies to dismantle systemic racism.

It also urges increased engagement from regions such as Asia and the Pacific, which have long been absent from the international spotlight. We have issued over 100 communications, addressing over 900,000 alleged victims of racial discrimination—a number that reminds us of both the scale of the challenge and the importance of this mandate.

Marking the Second Decade: From Visibility to Transformation

This moment, marking the Second Decade of People of African Descent in Asia and the Pacific offers an opportunity not just for visibility, but for structural transformation. Justice must begin with recognition, but it cannot end there. It must encompass legal protection, equitable representation, and historical redress. People of African descent are helping to build our region and must be meaningfully included in shaping in our collective futures.

Let this be a decade defined not only by remembrance, but by reckoning and renewal. By data that tells the truth. By policies rooted in dignity. And by movements that center those too long pushed to the margins.

Because when we lift those long pushed aside, we lift the dignity of all. When we invest in those made invisible, we strengthen the foundations of human rights.

This is our collective task. The work is before us. The Decade has begun.

Thank you.

