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## Human Rights Council

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**Annual report of the United Nations High Commissioner  
for Human Rights and reports of the Office of the  
High Commissioner and the Secretary-General**

**Promotion and protection of all human rights, civil,  
political, economic, social and cultural rights,  
including the right to development**

## **High-level intersessional discussion celebrating the centenary of Nelson Mandela**

### **Summary report of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights**

#### *Summary*

In its resolution 37/15, the Human Rights Council requested the High Commissioner to prepare and submit to the Council at its thirty-ninth session, a summary report on the high-level intersessional discussion celebrating the centenary of Nelson Mandela, which was convened on 27 April 2018. The aim of the discussion was to celebrate Mr. Mandela's life and legacy, in the context of promoting and protecting human rights through social justice, reconciliation and democratic ideals.



## **I. Introduction**

1. Pursuant to its resolution 37/15, the Human Rights Council convened, on 27 April 2018, a three-hour high-level intersessional discussion celebrating the centenary of Nelson Mandela, his life and legacy, in the context of promoting and protecting human rights through social justice, reconciliation and democratic ideals. The present summary report was prepared pursuant to the same resolution.
2. The panel discussion was chaired by the President of the Human Rights Council and was opened by the United Nations Deputy High Commissioner for Human Rights. The Deputy Secretary-General of the United Nations, delivered a keynote address by video message. The panellists were: Deputy Chairperson of the African Union Commission, Thomas Kwesi Quartey; Deputy Secretary General of the European External Action service, Christian Leffler; Chair-Rapporteur of the Working Group on the Right to Development, Zamir Akram; and Permanent Representative of South Africa to the United Nations Office and other international organizations at Geneva, Nozipho Joyce Mxakato-Diseko.
3. The panel discussion focused on celebrating Mr. Mandela's centenary by paying tribute to the outstanding role he played as an advocate of human rights, and by discussing the importance of his legacy, both for the present and for the future. The discussion illustrated Nelson Mandela's lifelong struggle for freedom, human rights and human dignity, equality and justice, and his role as a champion for the protection and promotion of all human rights.
4. The panel discussion provided an opportunity for representatives of States, international organizations and other stakeholders to pay tribute to Mr. Mandela and discuss the relevance of his legacy.

## **II. Opening of the panel discussion**

5. In her keynote video message, the Deputy Secretary-General of the United Nations welcomed the celebration of the centenary of Nelson Mandela, and of his legacy as a global giant for human rights. Nelson Mandela had understood that protecting and promoting human rights was fundamental for eliminating poverty, reducing inequalities, empowering women and creating just, inclusive and strong institutions that left no one behind. Those principles were the driving force behind the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Sustainable Development Goals, as well as the spirit of the African Union's Agenda 2063. The United Nations and the African Union were working closely to ensure that both Agendas were mainstreamed and integrated into the national planning frameworks of Member States, and would contribute positively to people-friendly and planet-sensitive transformation.
6. Mr. Mandela's experience should guide the international community on that pathway. Although the evil of apartheid was no more, injustice, racial discrimination and exclusion continued to be a reality for countless people around the world.
7. In closing, the Deputy Secretary-General emphasized that Mr. Mandela's life had shown the necessity of going beyond words to deeds. The Sustainable Development Goals were a call for action to make a real difference in the lives of people, societies and the world. Mr. Mandela's legacy should be honoured through actions to uphold human rights and human dignity, and seek peace over war, justice over injustice and reconciliation over revenge.
8. In her opening remarks, the United Nations Deputy High Commissioner for Human Rights recalled the importance of 27 April, Freedom Day in South Africa, which commemorated the first democratic and non-racial elections held in South Africa in 1994. That day had marked the end of three hundred years of colonialism, segregation and white minority rule, and the elections had led to the establishment of a new, non-racist

government led by Mr. Mandela. Freedom Day was a symbol of hope that the struggle to end racism and uphold human rights around the world could succeed.

9. Mr. Mandela's life had been a vivid testimony to the tremendous achievements that were possible when determination and courage were matched by integrity and married with the values of respect, compassion and dignity. Mr. Mandela had understood that inclusion enhanced the freedom and well-being of all. On becoming President, he had continued to uphold the values that he had championed throughout his search for justice. His calls for forgiveness and reconciliation had spared his country the agony of bloody retribution. He had also known that clear, principled leadership would exert a powerful influence throughout society by promoting long-lasting change and building values that could shield generations from suffering.

10. To truly honour Mr. Mandela and his legacy, the utmost effort should be made to recognize that all people were equal and interdependent, and to act to promote dignity, peace and rights, to end racism, discrimination and hatred, to promote the rights of the vulnerable and oppressed and to renew the fundamental struggle for justice and equality. Ms. Gilmore paid tribute to the resilience and sacrifice of South Africans and all others around the world who had stood up against oppression and for human rights.

11. In concluding, the Deputy High Commissioner recalled that de facto segregation persisted in many parts of the world and that people of African descent, and others, continued to be held back by structural racism and discrimination. At a time of rising divisions, when the cruel winds of hatred and intolerance were being whipped up for personal profit by many leaders across the world, the centenary of Nelson Mandela should serve as a reminder of the duty to struggle to uphold every human being's rights to equality, freedom, dignity and justice.

### **III. Summary of the proceedings**

#### **A. Statements by the panellists**

12. The Deputy Chairperson of the African Union Commission, Thomas Kwesi Quartey, welcomed the commemoration of the centenary of the legendary Madiba Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela as the symbol of Pan-Africanism, self-determination, reconciliation and solidarity in the struggles of humanity against apartheid, oppression and colonialism. Mr. Quartey also paid tribute to the late Nomzamo Winnie Madikizela-Mandela for her incredible determination to keep the torch of freedom and Mr. Mandela's legacy alive throughout her life.

13. Mr. Mandela had contributed to establishing a strong Pan-African sentiment, as well as a culture of resistance to discrimination, injustice, unfairness, impunity and inequality, principles that had become deeply ingrained in the workings of the African Union. He expressed his gratitude to Mr. Mandela for demonstrating by words and deeds that Africa's total liberation could be achieved if guided by the principles of ambition, perseverance, solidarity and freedom.

14. The African Union's Agenda 2063 and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development would be instrumental in realizing Mr. Mandela's vision for a united, prosperous and peaceful Africa, and in eradicating racism, empowering women and young people, and achieving equality and a better life for all. Mr. Mandela had fought not only against racism but also against ethnic discrimination among Africans. Constructive management of diversity, reconciliation, social harmony and nation building must be promoted, as well as the positive interrelationship between active citizenship, democracy, governance, human rights and the rule of law. In that regard, Mr. Mandela should be a role model for all Africans, in particular young Africans. Education was essential to break the cycle of illiteracy and counter the ideologies of militia, as well as to promote the crucial role that young people could play in advancing society. The African Union remained committed to providing young people with credible institutions and an enabling environment to thrive.

15. The African Union, at its Summit in 2013, had declared the period 2014–2024 Madiba Nelson Mandela Decade of Reconciliation in Africa, and in January 2018, the African Union Assembly had adopted the Declaration on the Centenary of Nelson Mandela, declaring 2018 the Nelson Mandela Centenary, and had called for a special peace summit.

16. In concluding, Mr. Quartey recalled some key lessons from Mr. Mandela's legacy, such as to never give up, to be proud of African heritage, that the fight for one's own freedom was a fight for the freedom of others, that freedom and justice could only be truly achieved by fighting for equality, and that the differences between people were strengths, not weaknesses.

17. The Deputy Secretary General of the European External Action Service, Christian Leffler, praised the legacy of Mr. Mandela, whose dedication to equality and whose perseverance and principles had not only created change, but had also inspired generations in South Africa and globally. Mr. Leffler also paid tribute to human rights defenders who, taking inspiration from Mr. Mandela, defended the same ideals and the universality, indivisibility, interdependence and interrelated nature of human rights, which were also being underscored in 2018 through the celebrations of the seventieth anniversary of the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the twenty-fifth anniversary of the adoption of the Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action.

18. Mr. Mandela's message remained more pertinent than ever as over recent years human rights, and particularly their universal nature, had been challenged by growing populist and nationalist politics and resurgent violent manifestations of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance.

19. Underlining the interconnection between human rights and security, Mr. Leffler observed that human rights violations, marginalization and discrimination were creating fertile ground for radicalization. He stressed the need to build inclusive and diverse societies that would in turn give rise to resilient communities that could promote and protect sustainable development and sustainable security. The experience of Europe demonstrated the importance of a strong legal framework prohibiting discrimination, hate crimes and hate speech, which must be vigorously enforced. Measures to prevent and tackle intolerance must also be stepped up, including by supporting projects and initiatives to prevent and counter all forms of hatred and intolerance and by endorsing the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

20. Collaboration between the European Union and Africa, in particular the Human Rights Dialogue with South Africa and cooperation with various regional and sub-regional organizations, was particularly welcome. He reaffirmed the European Union's commitment to enhancing its partnership with Africa on peace and security, and job creation for young people, with a view to achieving strong and resilient societies.

21. In concluding, Mr. Leffler called for action to promote equality and justice and to fight for the promotion and protection of human rights. He reaffirmed the European Union's commitment to work to realize Mr. Mandela's dreams, notably his belief in democratic institutions, including those at the international level, and multilateralism, and to fight for peace and dignity throughout the world. Against a backdrop of closing borders and unilateral interests, Mr. Mandela's legacy showed that people were stronger when they worked together, and that freedom, equality and rule of law could never be taken for granted and must be fought for endlessly.

22. The Chair-Rapporteur of the Working Group on the Right to Development, Zamir Akram recalled that Mr. Mandela had been a champion of human rights and fundamental freedoms, in particular of the global poor. He had been a staunch proponent of political, economic and social rights, especially of the downtrodden and the dispossessed. His legacy encompassed the promotion and protection of all human rights through social justice, reconciliation and democratic principles, as well as the fight against racism, racial discrimination and xenophobia. Mr. Mandela had recognized that there could be no human rights without human development. Eradicating poverty had therefore been his primary objective, not just for his own people but for all humanity.

23. Mr. Mandela's struggle against inequality and injustice had a special relevance and served as a guiding light for the Working Group on the Right to Development, which had been mandated by the Human Rights Council to monitor implementation of the Declaration on the Right to Development. The right to development was consistent with and informed by all the major international instruments adopted by consensus, including the Rio Declaration on Environment and Development, the Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action, and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, which provided a practical road map for realizing the right to development.

24. The Working Group must therefore rise above its current circular debates and develop the political will and spirit of compromise needed to realize the right to development. The celebration of the centenary of Mr. Mandela afforded an opportunity for the international community to take inspiration from the life and legacy of that great man, and to renew the pledge to work for political, economic and social justice for all. Although there would be innumerable obstacles and pitfalls in the realization of the right to development, the task could be achieved with the necessary commitment and cooperation of all Member States.

25. The Permanent Representative of South Africa to the United Nations Office and other international organizations at Geneva, Nozipho Joyce Mxakato-Diseko thanked the Members of the Human Rights Council, and in particular those from Africa, for having adopted the resolution mandating the organization of the high-level intersessional discussion celebrating the centenary of Nelson Mandela.

26. The event was taking place on the anniversary of the day when, 24 years previously, all the people of South Africa had voted for the first time, and had elected Mr. Mandela as the first President of a truly democratic South Africa, thereby marking the irrevocable transition of the country from apartheid to democracy. She praised civil society in particular, for its role in the anti-apartheid movement, in both Mr. Mandela's release from prison and the ending of the apartheid regime.

27. The coincidence of the centenary of Nelson Mandela with the seventieth anniversary of the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action should serve as a reminder of the values that were fundamental to the freedom and well-being of humanity, including the indivisibility of all rights, at a time when those values were being challenged. Mr. Mandela had stood for a world without racism, a world free of poverty, inequality and war.

28. Mr. Mandela had understood that civil and political rights on the one hand, and social, economic and cultural rights on the other, were interrelated and interdependent. The African Union's 2063 Agenda and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development were also based on precisely that premise, and sought to give content to the right to development and to realize economic, social and cultural rights for all.

29. Mr. Mandela had cherished multilateralism as a platform for forging common solutions to global problems. Cooperation between the United Nations and the African Union in search of peace and prosperity for the people of Africa was therefore particularly welcome. Ms. Mxakato-Diseko believed that Mr. Mandela would have wished for a Human Rights Council in which members could set aside their geopolitical interests and rise with a singular sense of common purpose to prevent abuses of human rights and protect ordinary people everywhere.

30. The best way to honour Mr. Mandela would be through action: not only by being outraged by the rise of white supremacist ideology, racism, racial discrimination, anti-Semitism, xenophobia and related intolerance, but by finding ways to transcend divisions and become a common bulwark against the erosion of the spirit of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action, while implementing the Durban Declaration and Programme of Action.

31. South Africans would remain eternally grateful for Nelson Mandela as one of the founding fathers of democracy, together with other giants of the anti-apartheid movement, such as Albertina Sisulu. Mr. Mandela had contributed to one of the most modern, progressive constitutions establishing a democratic, non-racial, and non-sexist government

based on the will of the majority, and which ensured the justiciability, accessibility and realization of fundamental human rights for the people of South Africa. Current and future generations must uphold his memory, by ensuring that those core values would never be compromised.

32. In concluding, Ms. Mxakato-Diseko emphasized that, while Mr. Mandela would always remain special to the people of South Africa, his legacy belonged to everyone as an embodiment of the totality of human rights. She thanked the Anti-Racial Discrimination Section of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights for its work, and called on the Human Rights Council to strengthen its support for the Section.

## **B. Interactive discussion**

33. In the ensuing discussion, representatives of the following States and international and intergovernmental organizations took the floor: Algeria, Angola, Australia, Austria, Belgium, Bolivia (Plurinational State of), Brazil, Bulgaria, Canada, China, Cuba, Cyprus, Czechia, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Egypt, France, Gabon, Ghana, Greece, Jordan (on behalf of the Arab Group), Lebanon, Libya, Madagascar, Malaysia, Mexico (on behalf of a group of countries), Morocco, Netherlands, Pakistan (on behalf of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation), Togo (on behalf of the African Group), Trinidad and Tobago, Slovenia, Sudan, Sweden (on behalf of a group of countries), Switzerland, Syrian Arab Republic, Thailand, Tunisia, United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, United States of America, Venezuela (Bolivarian Republic of) (on behalf of the Non-Aligned Movement), Viet Nam, Zambia and Zimbabwe, the European Union and Organisation Internationale de la Francophonie. Due to time constraints, the representatives of Ireland, India, Nigeria and the United Arab Emirates were unable to make their interventions orally, but provided statements in writing.

34. Representatives of the following non-governmental organizations took the floor: Amnesty International, the International Organization for the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, the International Youth and Student Movement for the United Nations, Rencontre africaine pour la défense des droits de l'homme, the Indian Movement "Tupaj Amaru", CIVICUS: World Alliance for Citizen Participation, and the Indian Council of South America.

35. All participants paid tribute to Nelson Mandela and his life achievements, both as a historical leader for fundamental freedoms and human rights and as a great political leader admired worldwide. They agreed that Mr. Mandela was not only an icon for Africa but also a great international symbol of freedom, democracy, human rights and human dignity, peace, social justice and equality. As a human rights defender, Mr. Mandela had devoted his life to the fight against racism, discrimination, oppression, poverty and intolerance, and had overcome the oppressive apartheid regime at a great personal cost. As the first democratically elected President of South Africa, he had moved a deeply divided country towards democracy. His name had become symbolic of sacrifice, humility and hope. Despite the suffering he had endured, he had remained committed to realizing his ideals through peaceful means, forgiveness, tolerance and reconciliation.

36. Many speakers underlined the significance of the date, 27 April, which was the anniversary of the first non-racial democratic elections, which had been held in South Africa in 1994. That day had put an end to the oppressive apartheid regime and had marked the end of three centuries of colonialism, segregation and white supremacy. It had allowed for the establishment of a democratic government led by the President, Mr. Mandela, and had opened the way for the establishment of a new South African non-racial, united nation founded on the principles of equality and well-being of all.

37. Several participants praised Mr. Mandela's role in leading the successful transition to democracy in South Africa. Through his efforts to promote reconciliation, forgiveness and diversity, he had been able to realize his vision of a rainbow society, diverse and united, in which women and men of any race enjoyed the same rights. He had led his country in the drafting of a new Constitution, which was considered one of most

progressive constitutions in the world. He had also given South Africans the opportunity to confront their past by establishing the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

38. Many speakers recalled Mr. Mandela's commitment to the universality of human rights, explaining that his life struggle had been guided by the fundamental principle that all human beings are born free and equal in rights and dignity, without any distinction of sex, colour, religion or origin. In that regard, the coincidence of the centenary of Nelson Mandela with the seventieth anniversary of the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action, was particularly noteworthy, and should be an exhortation for all to take up the fight begun by Mr. Mandela, who had been an embodiment of the values enshrined in those two documents.

39. Tribute was also paid to Winnie Madikizela Mandela for her determination and courage in fighting for freedom and equality; as well as to all human rights defenders who, like Mr. Mandela, often took the risk of being arrested, threatened or subjected to grave violations, to ensure that everyone could enjoy freedom, equality and justice. Recalling that 2018 marked the twentieth anniversary of the adoption of the Declaration on the Right and Responsibility of Individuals, Groups and Organs of Society to Promote and Protect Universally Recognized Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, several participants emphasized the urgent need for all Member States to ensure that human rights defenders could conduct their activities in an environment that empowered them to defend and promote human rights for all, without obstacles or fear of reprisal.

40. Despite Mr. Mandela's legacy, the end of the apartheid regime and an international commitment to combat racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance through the Durban Declaration and Programme of Action, discrimination, racism and hate speech fuelled by populist and xenophobic sentiments were on the rise worldwide, justifying the political use of discriminatory policies and practices appealing to nationalism, intolerance, fear and rejection. Millions of people continued to be victims of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance, which constituted grave violations of human rights and fundamental freedoms.

41. Many participants reaffirmed their commitment to combating racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance. Member States should show greater political will by participating actively in and ensuring the efficiency of the Durban follow-up mechanisms, and by ratifying and ensuring the full implementation of the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination. They also called on the Human Rights Council to strengthen its efforts to tackle the challenges of intolerance, xenophobia and racism.

42. Mr. Mandela's commitment to peace and multilateralism should inspire the international community at a time when violent conflicts were posing great threats to international security and stability. His life struggle had been for the betterment of vulnerable people, and he had given a clear message that income inequality and poverty prevented people from fully enjoying their human rights. His life and legacy represented hope for the underprivileged all over the world. Participants also recalled his fight for the eradication of HIV.

43. Some participants also recalled Mr. Mandela's support for the right to self-determination. Mr. Mandela had been and would remain a figure of the struggle for freedom and a source of inspiration for people who continued to suffer under occupation, and who would continue to resist occupation, refuse oppression and fight for justice.

44. All speakers acknowledged the utmost importance and relevance of Mr. Mandela's legacy to overcome the challenges currently facing the world. Many people continued to be denied a free vote, to suffer discrimination and racial segregation, and to live in poverty. The universality of human rights was being challenged in certain parts of the world. Peace, security and stability were undermined by protracted violent conflicts. All participants acknowledged the collective responsibility to keep Mr. Mandela's legacy alive by promoting and protecting human rights, justice, peace, reconciliation, democracy, peaceful conflict resolution and sustainable development, as well as by intensifying efforts to

overcome racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia, and related intolerance. Education was an important aspect of that struggle.

## **IV. Conclusions**

45. In concluding the panel discussion, the President of the Human Rights Council recalled that Nelson Mandela had been one of the greatest contemporary human rights leaders, who had been committed to advancing all human rights for all people. The celebration of his exceptional life achievement should serve as a reminder of the importance of holding firm to a morally just vision, and of working relentlessly to achieve positive change.

46. The celebration of the centenary of Nelson Mandela should also underscore the great deal of work still required to realize Mr. Mandela's ideal of a democratic and free society in which all persons lived together in harmony and with equal opportunities. Millions of individuals continued to suffer pervasive injustice, racial prejudice and social exclusion worldwide.

47. The joint celebration, in 2018, of Mr. Mandela's centenary and the seventieth anniversary of the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, afforded an important opportunity to renew determination to put an end to all human rights violations and turn Nelson Mandela's vision of a just and democratic society into reality. All Member States must keep in mind the values of human rights and dignity, equality and justice, peace and democracy, and freedom.

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