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UN: UN High Commissioner and independent experts to examine killing of George Floyd, systemic racism and police violence

(GENEVA, 19 June 2020) – Today, The UN Human Rights Council has adopted a resolution tasking the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights and other independent human rights experts to investigate and report on systemic racism and police violence globally, specifically including the killing of George Floyd and related incidents.

While an important step, the resolution falls short of a call by George Floyd's brother, Philonise Floyd, in an historic address to the Council to establish an independent international commission of inquiry focused on the situation in the U.S.

Following the killing of George Floyd by police officers in the U.S., triggering protests and outrage across the globe, the world's human rights body was called upon to act.

More than 660 human rights organisations from around the world, led by the families of victims of police killings in the U.S., called on UN member States to adopt a resolution to establish an independent international commission of inquiry related to the systemic racism, human rights violations and other abuses against Africans and People of African Descent in the United States and around the world.

The resolution, as originally drafted, [also called for the inquiry](#) to examine federal, state and local government responses to the recent protests that were triggered by the killing of George Floyd and other Black Americans in recent years: Breonna Taylor, Michael Brown, Ahmaud Arbery, David McAtee and countless others.

The Human Rights Council failed to set up a commission of inquiry, impeding genuine justice and accountability at the international level for issues of systemic racism and police violence in the U.S. "We believe this failure, on Juneteenth no less, reflects the cowardice of UN member States including Australia and European countries who refused to speak truth to power. We believe these States chose to prioritize narrow and myopic political interests over human rights; in doing so they are complicit in maintaining and perpetuating entrenched systems of white supremacy" said Salimah Hankins, Interim Executive Director of the US Human Rights Network.

Many delegations, particularly those from Europe and Latin America, worked in a coordinated way to shift the resolution from being specific to the U.S. to being generic. "The rationale provided by these governments, that racism is a global phenomenon and many groups experience racism, served to subvert the debate into an 'all lives matter' discussion which rendered invisible and denied attention to those who needed to be at the very centre of the Council's action," said Salma El Hosseiny, Programme Manager at the International Service for Human Rights.

Nevertheless, governments have tasked the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights to work with other human rights experts to present a report on systemic racism, police brutality and violence against peaceful protestors. Such a report can be used to keep the pressure on for change, and could be a tool for documenting injustices and violations in the U.S. and elsewhere.

The principled leadership by the African Group, particularly South Africa, Botswana and Namibia, led by Burkina Faso, who requested the urgent debate and led in the negotiations of the resolution, was particularly notable. “A number of African countries, and other UN member States stood up to extensive U.S. pressure and called out Western governments for failing to protect Black people from systemic racism and police violence,” added, El Hosseiny.

The voices of victims’ families resonated and were a central part of the debate as Philonise Floyd, George Floyd's brother, delivered a moving statement via video at the debate’s very outset. Ultimately, the Human Rights Council is accountable to victims and their families.

The urgent debate itself manifested the power dynamics taking place today, bringing the sense of urgency from the streets of Minneapolis into the Palais des Nations in Geneva. It connected directly with the social movements and global outrage that Black and minority communities are experiencing.

The Black Lives Matter movement has been a rallying call for movements across the globe experiencing oppression and brutality. The solidarity expressed by civil society across various contexts led to strong support to address systemic racism in the U.S.

“This urgent debate has only re-energised us to work tirelessly at all levels until governments meaningfully address the historic systemic racism and oppression faced by people of African descent in the U.S. and the rest of the world,” said El Hosseiny. To do so, it must ensure that:

1. There is an establishment of the facts, through an independent investigation, of systemic racism in law enforcement in the U.S. and elsewhere;
2. There are impartial mechanisms and processes for truth, justice and accountability;
3. There are measures for prevention and guarantees of non-recurrence of future violations.

Thank you to all those civil society organisations and human rights defenders who supported the call to hold the U.S. accountable. Our work continues!

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Additional Quotes:

In her statement the Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of Racism, Tendayi Achime, stated - “We are aware that some member states have argued that a commission of inquiry should be reserved for more serious human rights violations. We disagree. I repeat we disagree. If the national and global uprisings we are witnessing are not sufficient evidence of the gravity of the issues before you, it's difficult

to imagine what it would take to convince you that the situation we are facing is very serious. **It is difficult to imagine what might convince you to demonstrate the equal worth of people of African descent.**”

In his video message at the opening of the Urgent Debate, Philonise Floyd stated: “The way you saw my brother tortured and murdered on camera is the way black people are treated by police in America...I am my brother's keeper. **You in the United Nations are your brothers and sisters' keepers in America and you have the power to help us get justice for my brother, George Floyd.** I am asking you to help him, to help me, to help us - black people in America.”

In a [discussion](#) held by Women's March Global yesterday, Salimah Hankins, Executive Director of the US Human Right Network noted, “If this resolution does not pass on Juneteeth - the commemoration of the ending of slavery - it will really send a message that Black lives really don't matter.”

In her opening statement the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Michelle Bachelet noted, “Now we need decisive action across the world - not only to reform or reimagine specific institutions...but to address the pervasive racism that corrodes institutions of governments, entrenches inequality and underlines so many violations of human rights and the cycle of impunity which have permitted this to happen must end.”