



General Assembly Third Committee (Social, Humanitarian and Cultural)

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Purview:

The [General Assembly Third Committee](#) focuses its discussions on social, humanitarian and cultural concerns that arise in the General Assembly, although its work often overlaps with that of other United Nations organs, including the Economic and Social Council and its subsidiary bodies. Human rights, education and cultural preservation are typical issues for the Third Committee. Notably, the Third Committee would not discuss the legal implications of human rights matters, as those are discussed by the Sixth Committee, nor would it call for special studies or deploy monitors, as those tasks are handled by the Human Rights Council. The Third Committee also adheres to the purview guidelines of the [General Assembly](#) as a whole.

Topics:

Elimination of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance

Racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance continue to fuel tensions both within and between States. Recent events have demonstrated persistent acts of violence informed by racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance—including [racially-charged police brutality](#) in the United States—[heightened xenophobia](#) in South Africa and [mistreatment of refugees internationally](#). Racism and intolerance also affect access to fundamental human rights, for example by perpetuating [barriers and inequalities in healthcare](#), including physical segregation, disproportionate resource allocation and limited cultural competency and tolerance from healthcare providers. These issues have

come to the fore in light of [the disproportionate effect of the COVID-19 pandemic](#) on groups already marginalized due to race or ethnicity.

Founded in the immediate aftermath of World War II, the United Nations has a long history of stated opposition to racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance. The 1945 [United Nations Charter](#) and 1948 [Universal Declaration of Human Rights](#) assert that the fundamental rights contained within both documents apply to all peoples, regardless of race, ethnicity or origin. However, continued discrimination, particularly [the West German “swastika epidemic” of 1959](#) and [apartheid in South Africa](#), led the General Assembly to augment these documents by adopting the [United Nations Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination](#) in 1963. The Declaration elaborated on the United Nations Charter and Universal Declaration of Human Rights while urging the United Nations and Member States to revise institutional structures that perpetuate racism and racial discrimination and highlighting the offense to the dignity of persons that results from racism and racial discrimination. Work done on the Declaration also led to the creation of the 1965 [International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination](#) (ICERD). The ICERD codified many of the statements in the Declaration while also creating the Committee on Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (CERD) and a formal system for submitting complaints. While ICERD was a major step forward in international human rights, States Parties have also entered [a significant number of reservations and objections](#) to the Convention, particularly around articles involving hate speech and handling of complaints, [limiting its applicability and creating conflicting interpretations](#) of the text. Continued recognition of issues pertaining to racism and intolerance led to the creation of three [Decades to Combat Racism and Racial Discrimination](#) between 1973 and 2003 as well as the [1978](#) and [1983 World Conferences Against Racism](#).

In 1993, the Commission on Human Rights created the position of [Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance](#), tasked with monitoring and reporting on the efforts of Member States to address the concerns of victims of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance appealing to and communicating with States about human rights violations. The 1993 [Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action](#) further emphasized the commitments of the international community in eliminating apartheid and for Member States to

develop effective policies to combat racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance. In 2001, the third [World Conference Against Racism](#) was held in Durban, South Africa, resulting in the [Durban Declaration and Programme of Action](#). The Durban Declaration noted the continued failure to create universal respect for diversity and provided comprehensive international and national frameworks to guide the elimination of racism, with particular focus on persons of African descent, indigenous peoples, migrants and refugees. Although the Declaration marked a step forward in addressing racism and intolerance, the conference itself was fraught with controversies, including [disagreement over reparations](#), [accusations of antisemitism against multiple states and NGOs](#) and [the withdrawal of the United States and Israel](#). The Durban Declaration was revisited in [2009](#) and [2011](#), with a review meeting planned for 2021, [albeit without the support of many Western nations](#).

Although the United Nations recognizes the need for establishing improved, coordinated and coherent implementation of programs that tackle racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance, significant challenges remain. Many of the topics discussed within the context of these issues, including the [relationship between racism and police violence](#) and [discrimination against migrants](#), remain highly controversial. Concern also exists that Member States have used the controversial nature of these topics to promote political agendas at the expense of grappling with the issues themselves. Organizers of the 2001 Durban conference, including [diplomats](#) and [the former High Commissioner for Human Rights](#), have noted that many states appeared to enter the process with destabilizing goals and were unwilling to engage in the consensus-building seen at prior human rights conferences. These practices have continued beyond the 2001 conference [into subsequent review conferences](#) and into the General Assembly's discussion of other racism-related topics, including annual resolutions regarding [the threat of Nazism](#), which have been accused of being put forward to promote politically-motivated disinformation campaigns and [limit freedom of expression](#). However, this treatment of the topic and its foundational documents comes at a cost for marginalized groups that continue to suffer from racism and intolerance.

A further area of contention is the subject of [reparations for those affected by centuries of racism and colonialism](#), particularly people of African descent. ICERD notes that special measures to advance equity and secure protections for [adequate advancement of certain racial or ethnic groups or individuals](#) are

required as a reconciliation strategy, while the Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and racial intolerance [noted in 2020 that reparations necessitate moral, economic, political and legal obligations](#) in the pursuit of justice for victims of discrimination and intolerance and that existing mechanisms for reparations have followed patterns of exclusion produced by racial and ethnic inequality within countries. However, the Special Rapporteur also noted [significant political and legal opposition](#) to reparations, with former colonizing and slaveholding states arguing that current international law [should not be applied to them retroactively](#).

In the meantime, hate speech, hostility and violence remain significant concerns for the United Nations. The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted many of the harmful effects of racism and xenophobia, with race and ethnicity affecting [risk of transmission, access to healthcare and access to vaccination](#). The pandemic has also resulted in [a significant rise in racist and discriminatory attacks, particularly against those of Asian descent](#). This has followed other trends, including [an increase in antisemitic attacks](#) and the [rise of social media](#) as a means of distributing racist content and ideology. Despite progress in awareness-building, victims struggle to obtain justice and compensation for imposed strife. The continuation of discrimination and a lack of concrete action by the international community jeopardizes the capacity for inclusive and equitable communities.

Questions to consider from your country's perspective:

- What steps can the international community take to protect victims of discrimination and persecution based on racial, ethnic and national origin?
- What positive actions, such as reparations, should Member States take to support victims or descendants of victims of historical prejudice?
- How can Member States ensure access to economic, social and political opportunities and recourses for victims of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance?
- How can Member States uphold international commitments to best practices for preventing, combating and eliminating adapting manifestations of eradicating racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance?

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Assistance to refugees, returnees and displaced persons in Africa

The forced movement of people in sub-Saharan Africa remains widespread. The Secretary-General [observed](#) that by the end of 2019, the number of dislocated

persons in sub-Saharan Africa reached 33.4 million, up from 26.4 million in 2018. Displacement in sub-Saharan Africa is greater than in any other region of the world. This figure included 6.3 million [refugees](#)—people who are outside of their country of origin and unable to return due to threats to their safety—18.5 million internally displaced persons—individuals who have been forced to flee their home to avoid the effects of armed conflict but have not crossed a State border—530 thousand asylum seekers and 975 thousand stateless persons. This increase is attributed to myriad factors, including armed conflict, human trafficking, an economic recession and environmental deterioration. [More than four million children in Africa are refugees and more than seven million are IDPs.](#) The United Nations affirmed the increased risk and vulnerability to [physical and psychological injury, exploitation and death](#) of children in forced displacement.

In 1951, the United Nations General Assembly convened a [Conference of Plenipotentiaries on the Status of Refugees and Stateless Persons](#) to deliberate, draft and sign what would become the [Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees](#). The Convention defined the term “refugee,” outlined their rights to employment, welfare, housing and naturalization, and established the legal obligation of States to protect them. [Originally](#), this Convention was limited to protecting only European refugees displaced as a result and in the aftermath of World War II. In 1967, Member States began to sign the [1967 Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees](#), which broadened the applicability of the 1951 Convention by removing these geographical limitations. This paved the way for the [Organization of African Unity](#) (OAU), formed in 1963 and a precursor to the [African Union](#), to promote and protect the rights of refugees, returnees and displaced persons specifically in sub-Saharan Africa with the [1969 OAU Refugee Convention](#). The OAU Refugee Convention complemented the 1951 Convention and represented the collective undertaking by the Member States of the OAU to assist and protect refugees amid an era of decolonization and in accordance with their respective national legislations. Although ratified by 46 of the 55 African Union Member States, the full implementation of the OAU Refugee Convention remains a challenge. The failure of OAU Member States [to implement systematic monitoring mechanisms, legislation and other measures](#) has contributed to [long standing barriers](#) affecting asylum processes, restrictions on movements, xenophobia and maltreatment of refugee populations in parts of the continent.

[The turmoil of civil wars](#) throughout the 1980s and 1990s created a surge of refugees and IDPs in Africa, and although efforts to help these populations have

been ongoing, this increased the need for support from the international community. The United Nations arranged [Operation Lifeline Sudan](#) to aid displaced persons in 1989 and 1990, and the Security Council authorized the use of force in [Somalia](#) and [Rwanda](#) to facilitate delivery of relief for all those affected by civil wars. In 1992, the General Assembly adopted its first [resolution](#) on assistance to refugees, returnees and internally displaced persons in Africa, requesting that additional resources be dedicated to refugee programs and calling on the Secretary-General and UNHCR to continue their support of these persons.

While the 1992 General Assembly resolution addressed IDPs alongside refugees, [there has not always been equal support for all of these groups](#). The Secretary-General sought to elevate the plight of IDPs by appointing the first Representative of the Secretary-General on the human rights of internally displaced persons in 1992, but not much was done specifically to help IDPs for years. By 1996, [14 of Africa's 53 countries](#) would be involved in civil wars, causing strife and displacement throughout the region. In 1995, the Secretary-General of the OAU [raised concern](#) about the inconsistency in treatment among these different groups. This initiated a conversation about ensuring that those displaced internally within a State were receiving similar support to those that have become refugees in another State. While not legally binding, in 1998, the Representative of the Secretary-General on the human rights of internally displaced persons submitted the [Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement](#) to the United Nations as a framework for ensuring that IDPs are receiving the same assistance as other displaced persons.

Concerns about internally displaced persons continued to erupt throughout the 2000s, even as the number of refugees declined year after year. [Between 2000 and 2008](#) the number of refugees in sub-Saharan Africa decreased from 3.4 million to 2.1 million. Meanwhile, two million people were newly displaced within States in 2008, bringing the total of internally displaced persons on the continent to 11.6 million. To address the challenge, the African Union, in collaboration with the UNHCR and other international organizations, established the [Convention for the Protection and Assistance of Internally Displaced Persons in Africa](#) in 2009. Also known as the Kampala Convention, this framework operationalized the 1998 Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement and turned to addressing immediate issues and root causes affecting internal displacement, including intrastate conflict and gender-based violence. As of June 2020, the Convention has been

[ratified by 31 of the 55 States of the African Union](#), with many others expressing interest in doing so, showing the wide-ranging support throughout the continent. Some reasons why some States [have not yet ratified](#) the Convention include an overwhelming number of other priorities, IDPs not being numerous in the country and a lack of appreciation for the value of ratification.

The Kampala Agreement and its subsequent implementation failed to abate the continuously growing number of IDPs in sub-Saharan Africa, which has surged since 2015 [due to a mix of near-term and long-term factors](#). In recent years, Africa has hosted a third of the world's conflicts and, consequently, a third of the world's displaced persons. Thirteen African States, all of which are enduring internal conflict—caused in part by instability or corruption—rather than interstate conflict, account for nearly 90 percent of the 25 million people displaced on the continent. Looking forward, growing populations across the continent will continue to intensify the pressure on the limited resources of States, and environmental pressures exacerbated by climate change will amplify population dislocation. The World Bank [projects](#) that in the absence of large-scale action to reverse and adapt to climate change, more than 85 million sub-Saharan Africans could be forced to leave their homes by 2050. In their most recent report to the General Assembly on this topic, the Secretary-General [called upon](#) Member States, development partners and financial institutions to support inclusive approaches that resolve conflict and promote durable solutions. To this end, in 2020 the UNHCR [launched a 186 million USD appeal](#) to the international community to provide lifesaving protection and assistance to the Sahel region of Africa. Although assistance like this could alleviate some of the pressure facing displaced persons, the Secretary-General notes that long-term, adequate and predictable funding will be critical to fully address the challenges facing refugees, returnees and displaced persons in Africa.

Questions to consider from your country's perspective:

- What implementation strategies can Member States adopt to expand existing protections and support for refugees, returnees and displaced persons in Africa?
- How can the international community strengthen regional mechanisms to preemptively identify and support persons vulnerable to displacement?
- What steps can Member States take today to prepare for future causes of displacement, such as growing populations and climate change?

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