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The Netherlands: UN expert calls for greater equality and tolerance

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Dutch version

GENEVA (7 October 2019) – The UN expert on racism and human rights has questioned the perception that Dutch society is inherently inclusive and tolerant, saying this belief masks the reality of a national identity and national belonging that treats racial and ethnic minorities as perpetually foreign.

E. Tendayi Achiume, the UN’s Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance, met government officials, civil society and representatives of racial, ethnic and religious minority communities during an official visit to the Netherlands from 30 September to 7 October. She described the Kingdom’s formal commitments to equality, non-discrimination and inclusiveness as impressive, citing its legal and policy frameworks.

“The paradox in the Netherlands is that insistence that equality and tolerance already exist actually operates as a barrier to achieving this equality and tolerance in fact,” she said in a **statement** at the end of her visit. “This insistence makes it difficult to mobilize the resources and action necessary to ensure equality, non-discrimination and inclusion for all.

“In many areas of life - including social and political discourse, and even through some law and policy - the message is reinforced that to be truly

Dutch is to be white and of western origin, whereas other racial and ethnic groups such as people of African and Asian descent (who have been a part of the Dutch Kingdom for centuries), people of North African descent, Roma, Sinti and Travellers - even when they hold full citizenship and have done so for multiple generations - are not really or fully Dutch.

“Religion is also salient, and in the present political climate in particular, Islam is repeatedly represented - including in the national parliament - as inherently opposed to Dutch national identity, and even to liberal democracy more generally.”

The expert called on the government to show stronger leadership in its defense of equality, non-discrimination and inclusion, including by building on ongoing efforts to ensure that representative histories of colonialism and slavery take centre stage in educational efforts, which are central to combatting unquestioned racial intolerance and bias.

She noted the groups she consulted described the Netherland’s political landscape as highly polarized, and highlighted a mainstreaming of intolerant and discriminatory discourse, including at the highest levels of political discourse.

Many people also highlighted the prevalence of Islamophobic sentiment, most recently crystallized in the so-called Niqab Ban, a law prohibiting face covering in public. “The political debate surrounding the adoption of this law makes plain its intended targeting of Muslim women, and even if this targeting was not the intent, it has certainly been the effect,” the Special Rapporteur said.

The visit of the Special Rapporteur occurred shortly after a reliable whistleblower raised very serious concerns about culture of racial and ethnic discrimination and intolerance within The Hague police department. “This is not the first case of whistleblowing within the police force on issues to do with racism and intolerance. The government must take urgent steps to deal decisively with structures and individuals that promote or even tolerate racism and discrimination within police forces, and the government must at the same time provide strong protections for

whistleblowers brave enough to come forward with the truth.” She commended efforts the government is taking to improve prosecutions and mediations in cases involving discrimination, but called for greater efforts to combat ethnic profiling, and racial and ethnic discrimination and stereotyping within law enforcement.

Additionally, Achiume highlighted the heightened risks of refoulement under the Kingdom’s immigration and refugee practices, the prevalence of hate speech in public discourse, the civil, political, social and cultural rights of migrants, asylum seekers and refugee, and discrimination against racial and ethnic minorities in the employment, educational, health and housing sectors. The expert commended a decision not to include “Black Piet” in this year’s televised national Sinterklaas parade.

ENDS

***Ms E. Tendayi Achiume** (Zambia) was appointed by the Human Rights Council as **Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance** in September 2017. Ms. Achiume is currently a law professor at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) School of Law, and a research associate of the African Center for Migration and Society (ACMS), at the University of Witwatersrand in South Africa.*

*The Special Rapporteurs are part of what is known as the **Special Procedures** of the Human Rights Council. Special Procedures, the largest body of independent experts in the UN Human Rights system, is the general name of the Council’s independent fact-finding and monitoring mechanisms that address either specific country situations or thematic issues in all parts of the world. Special Procedures experts work on a voluntary basis; they are not UN staff and do not receive a salary for their work. They are independent from any government or organization and serve in their individual capacity.*

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