

**Commemoration of the International Day for the Elimination of
Racial Discrimination**



**Opening statement by
Ms. Navi Pillay
United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights**

**Geneva, 21 March 2013
13h15- 14h45, Room 19 Palais des Nations**

Excellencies,
Ladies and gentlemen,

I welcome you to this commemoration of the International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination.

The United Nations General Assembly proclaimed this day in response to the 1960 massacre in Sharpeville, South Africa, where dozens of peaceful demonstrators were killed by the apartheid Government. Growing up in South Africa, I remember vividly the events surrounding the demonstrations and their aftermath, as the news spread of how innocent and unarmed people dared to challenge the racist policies of that regime.

Sharpeville became a transformative moment in the struggle against racism and racial discrimination because, in reaction to that event, the world chose to act.

And yet we are still a long way from eliminating racism.

This year, we have chosen to commemorate this important International Day by highlighting the issue of racism in sport.

This is in itself a terrible indictment. Sport at its best is inclusive, generous-hearted and fundamentally multicultural — based on values such as teamwork, loyalty, merit and self-control. But the world continues to witness deeply unpleasant acts during sporting events, including during football matches.

They have included insults, offensive chants, Nazi salutes, petitions against hiring certain players and even systematic denial of opportunities to play or to join football teams based on colour or nationality. These deplorable acts of bigotry and prejudice have no place in the 21st century. They are an affront to human rights.

It can be argued that racism at sporting events is merely a stark reflection of the underlying racism in our societies. That may well be so. However, these incidents are particularly damaging given the important role that professional athletes, and sporting events, play in inspiring our children and teenagers.

Such incidents are also illegal. Sporting events are bound to comply with the provisions of international human rights law. Racism violates that law. Decades after the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, athletes — like all other individuals — have the right to a secure work environment devoid of racism and prejudice.

This means that event organizers should provide secure sporting grounds where acts of racism are clearly outlawed. At the very least, they must ensure that any racist act is met with prompt and decisive action. There must be accountability for racist offences.

I'm sure all of you have heard about the incident that took place in early January in northern Italy, during a so-called “friendly” match between Pro Patria and AC Milan.

This was the first time that a football match involving a major team has been abandoned in reaction to intolerable acts of racism. The firm stand against racial insults and

harassment taken by Kevin Prince Boateng, as well as many other footballers and athletes who spoke out in his support — including Patrick Vieira who is also with us today — resonated across the world.

Yet, since then, the issue of racism in sport has reared its ugly head on several more occasions. Such acts occur all across Europe and in every region of the world. There have also been a number of very disturbing incidents of racism between players.

Racism is a gross human rights violation; it is a crime, and must be treated as such by sports authorities. More immediate and more decisive action is needed if we are to stamp out practices that periodically blight the reputation of the most popular sport in the world. We need to bring football into line with the current thinking on international human rights and highlight its role as a worthy and extremely powerful partner in the struggle to combat racism and bigotry.

Football governing bodies have sometimes acted forcefully when governments have meddled in their affairs, and also when commercial interests have been at stake. In one recent case, a football player was fined 100,000 euros and banned for the duration of one international game because he made an unauthorised advertisement.

Yet one football association was fined a mere 12,500 euros because of racist behaviour by its fans. What disincentive is that, in a game worth billions? More impressive was the life ban from playing for the national team handed down by the Greek football federation to a footballer who made a Nazi salute last Saturday. This sends a strong message that such behaviour is totally unacceptable.

I urge football authorities and the sport's corporate sponsors to shoulder their responsibility to anticipate and deal with racism in football in a decisive and exemplary manner. They need to recognize that underlying all of this violence and discrimination is prejudice, and they should establish dedicated offices with a real commitment to taking appropriate and swift action.

Like millions of South Africans of my generation, I grew up with prejudice around me. I know that it takes time, patience and persuasion to tackle it, and that laws alone are not enough. But my life has taught me that ignorance and bigotry are no match for the power of education and example. When prejudice is systematically challenged by reason, negative stereotypes will fade.

As the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, I suggest that the time to kick the bigotry out of football is NOW. We have an opportunity to make the Pro Patria incident a key moment in the struggle against racism in sport.

The colour of our skin, our nationality, our ethnic origin does not make us lesser humans. If the authorities fail to insist on effective redress for insults, they are letting us all down

Today, we are privileged to have among us a number of distinguished panellists and experts who speak from the perspectives of professional footballers, football administrators and civil society.

Alongside Kevin-Prince Boateng of AC Milan is Patrick Vieira, who is a Goodwill Ambassador of the Food and Agriculture Organization and Football Development Executive with Manchester City. He played professional football in France, Italy and England. He also played for the French national team that won the 1998 World Cup and the 2000 Euro Cup. He has been active in youth development and very outspoken against racism in football.

The Presidents of FIFA and UEFA, Mr. Sepp Blatter and Mr. Michel Platini are unable to join us today, due to a meeting of the FIFA Executive Committee. However, they are represented by two senior managers, Mr. Federico Addiechi, head of Corporate Social Responsibility in FIFA and Mr. William Gaillard the Senior Adviser to Mr. Platini.

We also have two distinguished experts on the panel: Mr. Piara Powar is the leader of the Football Against Racism in Europe network. Ambassador Douale is Chair of the Inter-Governmental Working Group on the Effective Implementation of the Durban Declaration and Programme of Action. This is particularly relevant since today's deliberations may also feed into the processes of the Working Group, an important inter-governmental body on racism and xenophobia which recently adopted a number of recommendations on racism and sport.

Ladies and gentlemen, the expertise of the panellists who are with us today adds up over a century in football and sports administration. I hope that this panel will be able to cast light on the issues and provide not only thoughtful, but also practical, recommendations for swift progress.

Thank you for coming and I look forward to an inspiring and decisive discussion.