

Statement by Mr Kevin-Prince Boateng
International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination
Palais des Nations, Geneva 21 March 2013

Madame Pillay, High Commissioner for Human Rights,
Excellencies,
Esteemed fellow panellists and experts,
Ladies and gentlemen,

The incident we just saw in the video screening happened on 3rd January this year in Bursto Arsizio during a friendly match between my club, AC Milan, against a fourth division team. I interrupted the game and kicked the ball into the stands because I was angry and offended by the racist insults that were coming from the crowd.

On its own, the gesture would probably not have made much of an impact. However, my team mates from AC Milan followed me off the pitch without hesitating for even a moment.

The report that the entire AC Milan team had presented a resolute and united front against racist abuse made headline news all over the world. This is the reason why I am here today.

I would like to thank the High Commissioner for Human Rights, Ms. Navi Pillay and the Anti-Discrimination Section in her Office for the invitation. It is an honour to be asked to speak here today.

Ladies and gentleman, it is the year 2013 and racism is still here and it is still a problem.

Racism is not just a topic for the History Channel or something that features in stories about the olden days or that only occurs in distant countries. Racism is real and exists here and today. Racism can be found on the streets, at work and even in football stadiums.

There were times in my life when I didn't want to deal with the subject. I tried to ignore racism. Similar to a headache that you know will go away if you just wait long enough.

But that was a misconception. Racism doesn't go away. If we don't confront it, it will spread.

We have to confront racism and combat it. "A bit racist" does not exist. There can be no tolerable amount of racism. Racism is unacceptable no matter where or in what shape. Racism means more than just white against black. There are many types of racism. Racists come in many colours and nationalities.

The big problem with racism is that there is no vaccine for it. There are no antibiotics that you can simply take. It is like an extremely dangerous and contagious virus. It is emboldened by our indifference and inaction.

When I played for Ghana I learnt how to combat malaria. Simply inoculating people is not sufficient. You also need to dry out the swamp where the mosquitoes that spread malaria breed. I think that malaria and racism have a lot in common.

Football stadiums can be places where people with different ethnic backgrounds come together to cheer on their team or a dangerous swamp where healthy people can become infected with racism. We cannot allow racism to spread right in front of our eyes. Football stadiums, and many other places, are full of young people. If we don't dry up the swamp, many of them who are still healthy today will catch one of the most dangerous viruses of our time.

We, who are constantly in the public eye, have more responsibility than others. We cannot afford to be indifferent or passive.

People in sports, people like me and my team mates from AC Milan, people in the music business and people in the media have unique opportunities and therefore have a special responsibility.

We speak to parts of society and pierce the hearts of those people that political discussions will never reach.

History has shown how important the contributions of prominent athletes can be. I would go so far as to say that the reason that the American president and I share the same skin colour has to do not only with Martin Luther King but also with Mohammad Ali.

One of the most moving moments in my life so far was when I met Nelson Mandela during the World Cup in South Africa in 2010. What a courageous and inspiring man both in mind and stature!

His life showed me that standing up and raising your voice against racism is less dangerous than inaction and mute passivity.

It is just as important and necessary to confront racism today as it was all those years ago. We need to look toward the people who put their lives at risk in the name of the cause.

I am convinced that we are making a fatal and dangerous mistake if we believe that we can treat racism by ignoring it and hoping that it goes away by itself like a bad headache.

That is not going to happen.

Wherever we encounter racism, we need to stand up and act, expose and prevent it and whenever possible, dry up the swamps in which it developed and originated.

Thank you very much for listening!

Act, and don't react!