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Israel

Delivered by Mr. Aweke Kobi Zena,
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Mr. President,

My name is Aweke Kobi Zena, and I am the Coordinator of the National Anti-Racism Unit at the Ministry of Justice.

I was born in Ethiopia. My family and I arrived, like thousands of other Ethiopian Jews, in Israel 30 years ago, bringing with us a rich heritage of centuries of Jewish kingdoms in Ethiopia. Today, in Israel's textbooks, all Israeli students are beginning to learn the story of Ethiopian bravery and heroism on their journey to the Holy Land.

I will now share with you how our unit came about. In 2015, there were a number of incidents that involved police violence against Israelis of Ethiopian descent. These incidents – many of which went viral – lead to large-scale civil protests. These demonstrations focused upon the painful racism that many Ethiopian Jews face in their day-to-day lives, including discriminatory profiling practices.

The Israeli Government was attentive to the call of the protesters, and in February 2016 passed a Resolution by which it established an Inter-Ministerial Team headed by Ms. Palmor, Director General of Ministry of Justice. It was charged with developing an action plan to deal with racism in Israeli society in all aspects of life.

This team consisted of senior officials of the relevant ministries, in addition to representatives of the Civil Service Commission NGOs and members of the Ethiopian-Israeli community, among others.

After intensive work, the team presented the Prime Minister with its findings. This report is very meaningful, in the sense that it identified and recognized ongoing practices of racism against the Ethiopian Jewish population in Israel and called for its elimination. This report included fifty-three (53) recommendations to be implemented by various Government Ministries, who later adopted them all.

One of the main recommendations was the establishment of a new governmental unit within the Ministry of Justice for the coordination of the fight against racism. Even though the establishment of the unit responded to the protests of Israeli citizens of Ethiopian descent, the unit's activities are aimed to help ALL Israeli citizens who suffer from racism. On December 2016, I was chosen to head this unit after a career as a senior prosecutor.

Mr. President,

I would like to elaborate on some recent initiatives undertaken by my Unit:

- The construction of a database that will enable the Unit to receive and document complaints regarding incidents of racism. The Unit is currently monitoring and following dozens of complaints it has received. These complaints concern a variety of issues raised by different groups in Israeli society.
- The establishment of a Public Commission that assists the Unit's activity. The commission is comprised of members of all sectors of Israeli society, including: women, men, ultra-Orthodox Jews, Arabs, and Ethiopian Jews, as well as civil society representatives. The Commission is chaired by Retired Supreme Court Judge Elyakim Rubinstein.
- The formation of guidelines by the State Attorney as to how to investigate cases that raise suspicions of racial profiling by the Police.
- The appointment of Supervisors for the prevention of racism in all Government Ministries
- The establishment of Governmental guidelines to prevent governmental publications that may encourage prejudice or stereotypes.

Mr. President,

Like many countries, we face many challenges in this area. However, our Government has shown a real commitment to combatting racism not only against Jews of Ethiopian descent, but against all sectors of our society by establishing the Anti-Racism Unit.

We are already feeling the winds of change. Israelis today are more aware of the phenomenon of racism and its negative consequences.

My staff and I are personally committed to confronting these challenges in order to advance human rights and make Israel a better society for all of its citizens.

Eliminating racism will lead to a stronger, more empowered and just Israeli society.

Thank you very much.