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International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination – A Call For Action

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March 21 marks the International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination. Established by the United Nations in 1966, the day commemorates the anniversary of the killing of 69 peaceful anti-apartheid demonstrators in Sharpeville, South Africa. On this day, we must remind ourselves of our obligation to counter and ultimately defeat all vestiges of racism and xenophobia in all of their virulent forms.

Racism must be seen as an institutionalized system of oppression and exploitation that is reinforced by a complex and pervasive system of beliefs, policies, practices and laws. In the United States, while significant progress has been made over the years against the most egregious forms of state-sanctioned discrimination, racism continues to manifest itself in public policies and in public and private attitudes.

Last year, a coalition of human rights groups coordinated by the Network compiled a 600-page report that graphically illustrated the many challenges that remain to combat racism in this country. The “shadow report” was submitted to the U.N. committee reviewing U.S. compliance with the International Covenant on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD), which Congress ratified in 1994. Issues raised in the report included the disproportionate impact on African Americans from hurricanes Katrina and Rita; the discriminatory effects of the war on drugs, especially in terms of incarceration rates; continued examples of police brutality and killings targeting minorities; and the spate of anti-immigrant laws and policies being pursued and passed at the federal, state and local levels.

Unfortunately, the Bush administration chose to brush aside or ignore the concerns expressed by the committee in the wake of the ICERD review. Given that the U.S. has consistently stressed human rights when formulating foreign policy and criticizing other nations for their behavior, the Bush administration’s unwillingness to address similar

problems identified within its own borders stands as nakedly hypocritical and has helped undermine U.S. credibility and moral authority.

President Obama can take immediate and significant steps to repair this damage and improve the domestic human rights landscape. He should reactivate the federal Interagency Working Group on Human Rights, established by President Clinton but ignored during the Bush administration, to coordinate U.S. compliance with its human rights obligations. In addition, the Obama administration should revitalize the U.S. Civil Rights Commission and expand its mandate to include human rights. And the administration should quickly re-engage with the ICERD process, respond substantively to the U.N. committee's concerns and demonstrate conclusively that the U.S. now takes its treaty obligations seriously. Finally, President Obama should commit the U.S. to an active role in the Durban Review Process next month now that it appears the primary obstacles to participation have been cleared. On this day, we can ask for no less.

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