

## AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL PUBLIC STATEMENT

Date: 11 August 2020 Index: ORG 10/2863/2020

# Statement from the International Board on Amnesty International, racism, and Black Lives Matter

### Black Lives Matter

Those words should be so completely self-evident that it is unnecessary to say them. Yet how urgently they need to be said, and how vital it is that they are being said so loudly and clearly by people protesting all around the world.

The global outrage following the recent police killings of George Floyd and several other Black people has fuelled justified calls for accountability and change.

We are at a potential turning point, a historic moment to transform race relations, and especially the position of Black people, in a world that is deeply and structurally racist. We must not take this transformation for granted; there are those who will actively resist it or who will be complicit with a status quo that benefits them, and there will be backlash to any progress.

For Amnesty International, it is absolutely clear which side we must stand on. We stand resolutely with the movement which asserts that Black Lives Matter, because we stand for human rights, for the fundamental equality and dignity of every human, and their right not to be discriminated against. In espousing these values, we also acknowledge the important role of generations of Black people around the world in helping to shape the human rights movement through their intellectual leadership and struggles for liberation.

Many of Amnesty International's national entities have been stepping up, rapidly mobilizing people and resources in support of the Black Lives Matter movement. Some of them have had years-long programmes of work for Black people's rights and for equality locally and globally.

We are wholeheartedly committed to this work, and it is also our moral duty to look inwards at issues of racism, discrimination, and inequality in Amnesty International itself.

We must acknowledge that across all levels within Amnesty International we do not have equality, and that through our behaviours, practices, and systems, we sometimes perpetuate internally the very inequalities we try to change through our external human rights work.

This should not shock us. Anti-Black racism and other oppressive systems are deeply embedded in cultures and institutions around the world, perpetuating harmful stereotypes and inequities, and creating incalculable harm through millions of injustices. Amnesty International is part of this world. But we must do better.

Racism is encoded into Amnesty International's organizational model, which has been shaped by the colonial power dynamics that were fresh at the time of our founding and remain prevalent today. In recent years, we have made some notable changes at the organization's International Secretariat, such as the redistribution of staff and opening of offices around the globe, mainly in the Global South and East. We have also made important changes to the governance of the global Amnesty International movement, which have shifted significant decision-making power to members in the Global South and East. However, we

have not yet fulfilled the ambitions of this programme of change, and control and influence over our resources, decision-making, human rights work, and methodologies have remained disproportionately in the hands of entities in and people from the white-majority Global North. All of this matters: as our former Secretary General Salil Shetty remarked in 2018 in a [speech](#) on decolonising human rights, “When our power, money and decision-making comes from the North, we send a message about the moral authority of the North; and we lose our organic connection with struggles in other parts of the world.”

We have to accept that racism has also been manifested in organizational failures. At the International Secretariat, there have been bias and insensitivity in the way some people have been treated, from offhand comments to our handling of complaints to our recruitment processes. There has not always been sufficient accountability for this, or appropriate action and investment to ensure improvements. The International Board has also not always done enough in its oversight role, including ensuring that management is leading the necessary culture change, or that efforts to address issues of equity and discrimination were well resourced and implemented.

Just as we need to consider and change the power dynamics in Amnesty International globally, we must also confront these dynamics nationally and locally, recognizing that racism is more than just a North-South issue and manifests in specific ways in every national context. We ask our national entities to take up the work of addressing this if they aren't already, and to ask important questions about who is seen as belonging, who makes decisions, whose human rights struggles are prioritized, whose leadership and labour are recognized, and who receives (how much) pay for their work, and to specifically consider how anti-Black racism is relevant within their national contexts.

It would be disingenuous and an affront to the seriousness of these issues to suggest that we can address them with a few quick fixes. This must be a long-term commitment. But we have a moral obligation to act, and to keep building on the commitments, efforts, and achievements of so many across the organization over the years.

Following extensive discussions over the last few months, as a starting point for making more deliberate and focused improvements, the International Board and International Secretariat leadership team have committed to the following actions, with work already underway to move these forward:

1. A review of racism and discrimination in the International Secretariat, the terms of reference for which will be informed by the feedback from staff focus groups conducted by an external expert on racism (with specific attention to feedback from our Black and other racialized employees). This review will lead to a program of action.
2. Ensuring that our next Secretary General is recruited through a process that prioritizes diversity and inclusion, and that the successful candidate demonstrates understanding of issues of interpersonal and institutional bias and discrimination (particularly gender and race), and experience in fostering more equitable organizational processes, policies, and culture.
3. A renewed focus on the implementation of a 2017 commitment by the global Amnesty International movement to strengthen its work on Gender and Diversity, to ensure that we keep making the progress we need.

As Amnesty International does this work, we will have to ensure the following:

- We commit to real, mature, and progressive engagement with the call of the US activist and writer Angela Davis to act not just as a non-racist organization, but an antiracist organization;
- We recognise the difference between antiracism work which is about addressing racial inequity, and what is often called “diversity and inclusion” work which may be more about human variation decontextualized from analysis of power and privilege;

- We treat anti-Black racism as a distinct phenomenon that all non-Black people may participate in and benefit from;
- We prioritize the safety and wellbeing of Black and other racialized people in our efforts, protect them from backlash, and treat them with care and sensitivity, recognizing frustration, anger, grief, and other such reactions to racism as valid;
- We recognize that our individual commitments to human rights do not prevent us from perpetuating racism;
- We recognize the intersection of racism with other forms of discrimination such as sexism, classism, homophobia, transphobia, and ableism;
- We recognize that learning and accountability are ongoing processes and will not be achieved through one-time measures;
- We ensure assessment and accountability are embedded into our practices; and
- We recognize and draw on the knowledge of those with relevant lived experience in the organization without unduly burdening them and acknowledge that leadership on these issues has often been informal and uncompensated.

Above all, we must embrace the challenge of change. Our movement as a whole must grapple with how we can act justly with one another, and as a truly equal, global community. We must hold ourselves to the same standards we so insistently and rightly ask of others. We owe this to one another, and to those we work for and with.

As people who have come together because we care deeply about building a better world, the International Board believes we are up to the challenge.

**Ends**

*(This statement is adapted from an internal statement by the International Board circulated in June 2020).*