"RACE, RACISM, EQUALITY AND THE UN CHARTER: The Promise of Equality Must Begin at Home"

Keynote Address by

Ambassador Anwarul K. Chowdhury
Former Under-Secretary-General and High Representative of the United Nations;
Founder, Global Movement for The Culture of Peace

United Nations Day Observance by UN-ANDI
27 October 2026 | Virtual

Dear colleagues,

Warm and heartfelt collegial greetings to you all!

I thank the United Nations Asia Network for Diversity and Inclusion, UN-ANDI, for inviting me once again to join you in observing the United Nations Day.

My association with UN-ANDI goes way back to its conceptualization in 2019. I have followed its development with appreciation and pride. My special thanks for that go to particularly Shihana Mohamed for her continuing and diligent commitment and contribution.

UN-ANDI's commitment to diversity, inclusion, and institutional fairness deserves our wholehearted support.

This year's theme — "Race, Racism, Equality and the UN Charter" — invites us to reflect on a fundamental question:

How faithfully does the United Nations practice the equality it was created to uphold?

Eighty-one years ago, the founders of the United Nations placed human dignity and equality at the heart of its Charter.

Its Preamble reaffirmed faith in fundamental human rights, the dignity and worth of the human person, and the equal rights of women and men - and nations small and large, poor and rich, weak and strong.

These were extraordinary commitments in a world still marked by colonial domination and institutionalized racial discrimination.

The Charter offered humanity a vision of a more just and peaceful world.

Yet, eight plus decades later, the distance between that promise and its realization remains troublingly wide.

Racism persists through prejudice, intolerance, and institutional practices that perpetuate unequal and biased treatment.

Discrimination does not always announce itself. Sometimes it is concealed in the ordinary functioning of institutions and interpersonal exchanges of all manners.

For those of us who have devoted much of our lives to the United Nations, this reality carries particular significance.

I have served the Organization both as a representative of Bangladesh, as an international civil servant and now as a proud member of civil society.

Over the years, I have witnessed the extraordinary dedication of UN personnel from every region of the world.

But I have also seen how unequal representation, institutional attitudes, and discriminatory practices can undermine morale and diminish effectiveness.

The United Nations cannot credibly advocate equality throughout the world while tolerating discrimination within its own structures.

Our global credibility begins with our institutional integrity.

This is why the work of UN-ANDI - and other similar groups - are particularly important.

UN-ANDI's efforts to identify institutional barriers, encourage open discussion, and promote fair representation deserve recognition.

Its earlier work on racism and racial discrimination among UN personnel was especially valuable.

I understand that further efforts are underway within the UN Secretariat to examine racial discrimination through staff surveys.

Such initiatives are welcome.

But surveys are only the beginning.

Their value depends on whether institutional leadership acknowledges the findings and acts upon them.

Staff must be able to speak openly, without fear of retaliation.

Recruitment, promotion, and leadership opportunities must reflect fairness, transparency, and merit.

We know well that accountability gives meaning to commitment. Implementation gives credibility to policy.

There is also a wider dimension of equality that deserves our attention.

The Charter affirms the sovereign equality of nations.

Yet international decision-making continues to reflect profound inequalities of power.

The Security Council veto remains the most conspicuous example.

I have long maintained that the veto is undemocratic and inconsistent with the spirit of sovereign equality and the true spirit of the United Nations itself.

Its influence extends beyond the Security Council into the wider functioning and leadership of the Organization.

The voices of developing countries and the Global South must receive their rightful place in shaping multilateral decisions.

Representation matters because perspectives matter.

Last year, at this UN-ANDI observance, I expressed serious concerns about the direction of the UN80 Initiative.

Those concerns remain relevant.

Financial pressures and administrative reforms must never become excuses for weakening institutional fairness or compromising the independence of the international civil service.

An institution cannot strengthen its credibility by weakening its founding principles.

Dear colleagues,

For many years, I have advocated the Culture of Peace as an essential foundation for humanity's future.

The United Nations General Assembly adopted the Declaration and Programme of Action on a Culture of Peace in 1999.

That historic commitment recognized the importance of human rights, equality, tolerance, understanding, and respect for diversity.

Racism is fundamentally incompatible with the Culture of Peace.

It perpetuates mistrust and undermines the human dignity upon which peaceful societies depend.

Peace cannot flourish where human dignity is denied.

The Culture of Peace must find expression in our institutions, our relationships, and our daily conduct.

Each of us bears responsibility for each of our actions, for the attitudes we encourage and for

the conduct we tolerate.

As we observe the eighty-first anniversary of the United Nations, I remain conscious of the serious challenges confronting our global Organization.

Its shortcomings are real. Its credibility has been tested.

Yet my faith in multilateralism and in the United Nations remains steadfast.

I encourage UN-ANDI to

- continue its valuable work with determination.

- continue to raise difficult questions.

- continue to promote understanding across regions and backgrounds.

- continue to insist that the principles of equality and human dignity guide the everyday functioning of the United Nations.

Let us remember:

Equality proclaimed is a promise.

Equality practiced is progress.

Equality sustained is the foundation of peace.

Now let me underscore here an unacceptable reality:

in its eighty-one years of existence,

the United Nations has not yet elected a woman Secretary-General —

eight decades plus, nine men, and not one woman.

What an embarrassment – what a shame!

How can an institution that speaks of equality

at every podium continues to model inequality at its pinnacle?

The credibility of the UN's advocacy depends

on its own reflection in the mirror.

Here, I am depressed to note that the Spirit of the United Nations is blatantly faltering this year as we observe the United Nations Day.

May this United Nations Day renew our collective resolve to bring the practice of our Organization closer to the promise of its Charter.

May the true Spirit of the United Nations continue to inspire us.

As we celebrate the UN Day again next year, let us realize the vision of equality fully as reflected in the Charter's Article 8 and honor ourselves by having a woman at the helm of the United Nations.

****