Ladies and gentleman,

It is a great pleasure for me to attend this conference. I would like to thank all the organizers for kindly inviting me to this important event. The beginning of this new year is an ideal opportunity to reflect on the challenges that lie ahead and find effective and innovative strategies to overcome them.

I am particularly pleased to make a statement regarding the substantive aspects of the Durban Review Conference and its centrality to the fight against racism elsewhere. I have stated many times that the breadth and ambition of the Durban Declaration and Programme of Action created a beacon of hope for those of us working against all forms of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance. Never before had we identified so clearly the key international, regional and national strategies that need to be implemented to redress historical wrongs and current injustices. The consensus forged around the DDPA is yet another indicator of its progressive nature and balanced approach.

The unprecedented framework established by the DDPA, however, has yet to be fully implemented across the globe. In this regard, the Review Conference is a unique chance to redress these serious implementation gaps and to consolidate effective strategies to achieve the ambitious goals set out in the DDPA. At the same time, this is the best opportunity we have to rebuild the
strong international consensus that was shaped in Durban in the fight against all forms of racism.

We are currently at a critical stage in the Durban Review process, with Member States coming together to negotiate and agree on an acceptable outcome document. While there are certainly some challenges ahead, I am optimistic concerning the future stages of negotiations.

Since I took up my functions of Special Rapporteur last August, the Durban Review Process has been the central aspect of my mandate. I attended the Africa Regional Preparatory Meeting in Abuja last August and the Second Substantive Session of the Preparatory Committee in the fall. I have also managed to reflect extensively on the contributions made by my predecessor to the earlier stages of the process and by other Special Rapporteurs throughout.

I would like to focus my statement today on some of the substantive issues that I think lie at the forefront of the fight against racism today and which, to a lesser or greater extent, should be part of the debate during the Review Conference.

Let me start by focusing on what is perhaps the main topic on the international agenda in 2009: the financial crisis. I have spoken elsewhere about the possible negative consequences of the financial crisis on national and international efforts to fight racism and xenophobia.

The economic slowdown forecast for the next years can contribute to the emergence of ethnic and racial tensions in areas where migrants live. Such tensions often arise when there are problems in the economy as a whole, and in
particular the labor and housing markets. With soaring unemployment and decreasing salaries, some groups may try to manipulate public opinion to generate strong anti-immigration backlashes and to blame migrants for current economic problems. These xenophobic expressions are at times intertwined with racial prejudices and stereotypes, as migrants can often be differentiated based on their race or ethnicity.

A set of measures is required to prevent the rise of such xenophobic feelings and their translation into policy. First of all, States should be vigilant regarding their human rights obligations, in particular vis-à-vis migrants, as I outlined above. Appropriate institutions and legislation is required to punish those who discriminate, incite or perpetrate acts of violence against foreigners or members of minorities. More broadly, political leaders should be sensitive to the impact of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance, reaching out to minorities and demonstrating constant vigilance regarding their human rights situation. While the DDPA already addresses some of these required actions, it is my sincere hope that the Review Conference will strengthen this call for action and mobilize public opinion on the importance of the fight against racism.

Another thematic issue that should be addressed in the Review Conference is the overlap between poverty and racism. In many areas, due to historical legacies and present discrimination, one can quickly identify that the poorest segments of the population are disproportionately composed of racial or ethnic minorities. This structural situation poses numerous challenges to the promotion of equality. Poverty puts members of minorities in a vicious circle – lack of education, adequate housing and health care transmits poverty from generation to generation and perpetuates racial prejudices and stereotypes in
Breaking with this double trap – racism and poverty – is therefore an essential requirement to promote equality and non-discrimination.

Appropriate and targeted actions are required to revert this situation. While the promotion of equal treatment is essential – particularly in access to public services, the job market and housing – additional actions are needed to rectify inequalities created by long-term trends. This includes, in particular, “Special measures taken for the sole purpose of securing adequate advancement of certain racial or ethnic groups or individuals requiring such protection as may be necessary in order to ensure such groups or individuals equal enjoyment or exercise of human rights and fundamental freedoms”, as provided for in Article 1.4 of ICERD.

Another issue I would like to address is the centrality of anti-racism efforts in post-conflict recovery. Contrary to what is generally reported in the mainstream media during outbreaks of ethnic violence, racial or ethnic differences are rarely the root historical causes of conflict. Referring to age-old hatreds and ethnic discords is a misleading way to refer to these conflicts and blurs the primary political dimension they have. Racial and ethnic differences are often instrumentalized by leaders who want to create cleavages within society and explore these differences for their own political gains. The racial or ethnic dimensions of conflict is therefore often artificial and the result of political manipulation.

However, once the racial or ethnic divisions within a conflict come to fore, it takes a completely different dimension. When individuals start to identify themselves with one of the parties based on their own identity, the potential for large-scale violence is worrisome. Even when peace agreements are signed and
post-conflict starts, these tensions may continue to lie underneath the apparent stability, thus increasing the likelihood that conflict may recur.

Time and again the international community has tried to remedy these situations while disregarding the real sources of the problem. Without targeted action to address these underlying tensions, in particular a strong anti-racism program, efforts to promote stability will be condemned to failure. The racial or ethnic fractions that opened during conflict need to be addressed, such as with broad programs of national reconciliation that foster inter-ethnic cooperation. In doing so, bringing those responsible to justice and combating impunity should be kept in mind at all times. While the easier short-term fixes sometimes may point to virtual separation among ethnic groups – such as by the creation of ethnically-defined political parties – the only lasting solutions are those that build bridges among communities and allow them to identify with a common future.

Ladies and Gentleman,

I could of course identify a number of other priority areas in international efforts to fight racism. However, in view of the prominence and experience of the participants of the seminar, I would like to keep our discussion interactive and engage in productive discussions with all of you. This would certainly provide useful guidance for my activities in the future and for my engagement in the Durban Review Process.

Thank you very much.