



December 18, 2020

2020 International Migrants' Day: COVID-19 and racism as drivers of discrimination and exclusion against migrants and minorities – A time to challenge our humanity

The African Regional Organisation of the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC-Africa www.ituc-africa.org) joins Africans and the rest of the world to commemorate the 2020 International Migrants' Day. The theme for this year's commemoration is "We live together", which is premised on the need for social cohesion that is engineered on the recognition that migration presents benefits for everyone. ITUC-Africa joins the estimated 272 million migrants scattered all over the corners of the world to accentuate their voices that their lives matter and that their rights and dignity should be upheld and respected.

ITUC-Africa observes that migrants' rights were regressed in the course of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. Aside from massive job and income losses that migrants suffered, they were subjected to all forms of egregious abuses such as social exclusion, humiliation, discrimination and exploitation. Where and when migrants had to work, they were not provided adequate personal protective equipment against COVID-19.

Millions of migrants who work in homes, mostly women, were subjected to extra and long hours of work without compensation and quite a number were victims of physical abuses such as beating and torture, sexual harassment and rape. The case of dozens of Africans rounded up and detained in sub-human conditions in Saudi Arabia represents one of the publicly exposed cases of inhuman treatment meted out against migrants under the pretext of curtailing the virus. In all, the mental abuse and trauma that migrants were subjected to were deep and harrowing.

ITUC-Africa also notes that the skewed perception that the coronavirus is a mobility disease triggered and sustained these kinds of inhuman and sadistic treatment against migrants. Somehow, it was convenient to forget that migrants were at the heart of the fight against defeating the virus. Migrants were reporting to work in hospitals as nurses, doctors, laboratory technicians and ambulance drivers; they were on the streets as cleaners and those disinfecting the streets against the virus; as scientists and health

experts working hours-on-end to develop treatment medicines and vaccines against the virus and those in the supply chains producing and distributing essential supplies. We will not forget the farmers in the fields sweating to ensure that food for nourishment is available. They deserve roses and not thorns.

Further, ITUC-Africa is concerned that racism has a historic intersection with migration and has also, in recent times, thrown up flashpoints in human, communal and work relations across the globe. Black people, Africans, brown and non-white peoples have suffered increased hatred, discrimination, xenophobia, verbal and physical abuses simply on account of their skin pigmentation. Reports have shown that black people died more from COVID-19 infections on account of less care and slim access to treatment. These developments point to the deep-rooted systematic racism that is unacceptable, unsustainable and must be uprooted forthwith. The global human community must replace systemic racism with affirmative actions.

For ITUC-Africa, COVID-19 has exposed the weak and haphazard implementation of the United Nations' Global Compact on Migration (UN-GCM). We reiterate that GCM represents a multilateral approach to achieve a pro-rights approach to the governance of migration. However, we are concerned that the needed political will and global cooperation to drive the attainment of the goals set out in the 23 objectives are peripheral and weak.

From the above, therefore, ITUC-Africa calls for governments across the globe to pay more attention to the plight of migrants and make conscious provisions for the protection and guarantee of their human and labour rights as we all battle to defeat COVID-19. We urge governments to take genuine steps to improve health and safety conditions at workplaces and communities and to make adequate provisions for personal protective equipment for workers, including migrants.

We also call for the ratification of enabling standards and instruments that will aid in the guarantee of the rights of migrants. In particular, we call on African governments to adoption International Labour Organisation Conventions 143 (Migrant Workers – Supplementary Provisions); 189 (Decent Work for Domestic Workers) and 190 (Violence and Harassment).



Kwasi Adu-Amankwah
General Secretary, ITUC-Africa