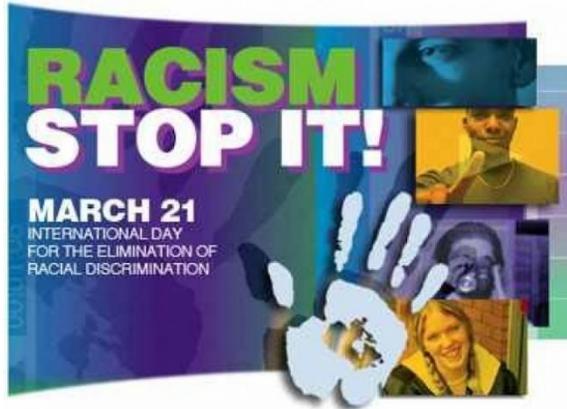




PRESS RELEASE – 21/03/2020

21st March – International Day Against Racism



This year's 21st March, proclaimed by the General Assembly of the United Nations as the **International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination** for the killing of 69 peaceful demonstrators by the apartheid regime of South Africa, finds the whole of humanity in the vice of the coronavirus pandemic and the efforts to deal with it. These have led to the cancellation of marches and other events planned in Europe and all over the world, including ours here in Cyprus, to raise our voices and declare our opposition and resistance to racism and xenophobia.

The demonization of the right to asylum and the refugee flows and their interconnection with terrorism, structural racism and discrimination, hate speech and hate crime against migrant and refugee communities, against minorities and diversity, the demonization of NGOs and human rights defenders, all take on terrifying dimensions and they are fomented by the government narrative and policies, sections of the media and social media, which often uncontrollably spread fake news, thereby threatening people's democratic achievements and decimating solidarity with vulnerable communities and groups, which experience racism and exclusion and inability to enjoy their basic and fundamental rights on a daily basis. The coronavirus pandemic further adds to the above and is used as a tool for legitimising policies, narratives and rhetoric against those most vulnerable.

It was only yesterday that the state, in breach of the basic principle of the customary international law, that of non refoulement, chased away a boat with refugees in the territorial waters of Cyprus that had approached the Cypriot shores, violating their right to asylum. The government was applauded for this action by extreme right and nationalist groups on social media, while the media almost totally ignored it and other quarters chose to remain silent. It was only yesterday again that an Iranian citizen with long-term residence in Cyprus was killed by police shots as a result of a complaint by Cypriots for causing disturbance in their village. A victim of institutional racism that wills the life of migrants and refugees to count less. Migrant women and girls were for years unclaimed by the authorities until their murders by a serial killer was revealed. Migrants remain uninformed about the measures for the coronavirus and they lose their jobs but the state's protection net does not include these most vulnerable groups as the announced measures are essentially addressed only to Cypriots. The Kofinou Reception Centre for asylum seekers has been turned to a closed centre, because of the coronavirus, despite the fact that there is no case of the virus, simply on the basis of the status of the persons staying there as asylum seekers. The Pournara Centre of Temporary Hospitality for asylum seekers has been turned to a detention centre for African asylum seekers, on the basis of a clearly racist policy that wills some asylum seekers to move freely and others to be in detention, the only criterion being their colour and ethnic origin.

The Cyprus government, based on an unprecedented extreme right narrative, has developed an “Action Plan on migration”, which aims to prevent refugees from coming to Cyprus, to the effective exclusion of a large number of refugees from the right to effective legal remedy, the enclosure of asylum seekers in closed detention centres and the forced return of migrants and refugees to their countries of origin.

It has repeatedly interconnected refugees with terrorism and public safety as well as with Turkey, the perennial enemy, in the context of a narrative about its organised efforts to change the demographic character of Cyprus by channeling refugees to Cyprus, a narrative that is well received by extreme right and racist forces, instead of responsibly informing and sensitising its citizens and society about asylum and to explain that no human being leaves their country if there is no serious reason compelling them to do so.

At the same time, the Cyprus government has unleashed a relentless war of fake news, defamation and criminalisation of the action of NGOs engaged in the area of migration and asylum, creating thus fertile ground in society for their targeting and demonization.

In view of many of its member states having adopted the above policies and rhetoric, the E.U. seems unable to face up to the challenges of asylum and to maintain and strengthen the principles on which it is based – equality, the rule of law and respect of human rights, either by tolerating the violations of European law by its member states and/or through the adoption of policies that undermine these principles, such as the agreement between the E.U. and Turkey, which has recently been updated.

Today is the day we must once again declare and emphasise the necessity for resistance to all the above and the necessity to declare clearly our commitment to intensifying the struggle against racism and xenophobia, against nationalism and neo-nazism. Today is the day we, as a society, must declare our commitment to the principles of the rule of law, equality and human rights but also our support and solidarity to migrant and refugee communities, the most vulnerable groups of our fellow human beings to the scourge of racism and xenophobia.

Steering Committee

