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UK has seen 'Brexit-related' growth in racism, says UN representative

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UN special rapporteur on racism says 'extreme views' have gained ground in Britain since vote

Brexit has contributed to an environment of increased racial discrimination and intolerance, the UN special rapporteur on racism has said, as she identified a range of institutional prejudices that plague the lives of ethnic minorities in Britain.

Speaking at the end of her mission to the UK, Prof Tendayi Achiume pointed to a Brexit-related growth in "explicit racial, ethnic and religious intolerance", including extreme views that have gained ground in mainstream political parties of the left and the right.

"The environment leading up to the referendum, the environment during the referendum, and the environment after the referendum has made racial and ethnic minorities more vulnerable to racial discrimination and intolerance," she said.

Achiume, from Zambia, was appointed the UN's special rapporteur on contemporary forms of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance in September 2017. A professor of law at University of California, Los Angeles, she is the first woman and the first person from southern Africa to fill the role.

"The discourses on racial equality before, during and after the 2016 referendum, as well as the policies and practices upon which the Brexit debate has conferred legitimacy, raise serious issues at the core of my mandate," she said.

"Many with whom I consulted highlighted the growth in volume and acceptability of xenophobic discourses on migration, and on foreign nationals including refugees in social and print media."

Achiume spent 11 days in the UK investigating the impact of Brexit on racial equality. But she went beyond that mandate, highlighting the scandal of misapplication of "hostile environment" policies on the Windrush generation of Caribbean migrants, the disproportionate criminalisation of black people, and the "sustained and pervasive" vilification of Muslims via Prevent, the government's counter-radicalisation strategy.

Achiume also expressed alarm at the stark increase in hate crimes and incidents across the UK after the referendum to leave the EU.

"The harsh reality is race, ethnicity, religion gender, disability status and related categories all continue to determine the life chances and wellbeing of people in Britain in ways that are unacceptable and in many cases unlawful," she said.

Achiame called for the repeal of the policies at the “rotten core” of the hostile environment, which she said affected not just irregular immigrants, but also individuals who had regular status, “and many who are British citizens and have been entitled to this citizenship as far back as the colonial era”.

Her visit, she said, came unexpectedly amid fraught and highly relevant public and political debates. “A clear example was the resignation of the home secretary, Amber Rudd, on the first day of my visit,” she said.

“This resignation came amidst the still-unfolding scandal of the gross human rights violations and indignities that Afro-Caribbean British citizens popularly referred to as the ‘Windrush generation’ have had to endure as a result of the so-called ‘hostile environment’ policy introduced during prime minister Theresa May’s tenure as home secretary.”

On criminal justice, Achiame pointed to the findings of the Lammy review, which showed how minority groups are a disproportionate target “at every stage in the criminal justice process”. She called for the full implementation of its recommendations.

“I am shocked by the criminalisation of young people from ethnic minorities, especially young black men. They are over-represented in police stop and searches, more likely to face prosecution under the country’s joint enterprise provisions, and are over-represented in the prison system,” she said.

She added: “There can be no question that a pervasive and officially tolerated culture of racial profiling is at work in certain police forces, and that racial and ethnic minority children and youth are among the most vulnerable.”

Operation Prevent, the government’s counter-terrorism strategy, should be suspended, Achiame said, while officials conduct a comprehensive audit of its impact on racial equality.

She criticised the way it made “teachers, professors, nurses, and doctors ... the frontline agents of countering extremism,” adding: “Widespread enforcement of the Prevent duty is fuelling distrust among racial and ethnic minority communities, especially those who are Muslim.”

“The concern ... is the policy choice embodied in the Prevent programme, which mandates civil servants, social workers, care-givers, educators and others, to make life-altering judgments on the basis of vague criteria in a climate of national anxieties that scapegoat entire religious, racial and ethnic groups as the presumptive enemy,” she said.

Achiame is due to present her full report on the findings and conclusions of her visit to the Human Rights Council in Geneva in June 2019.

A government spokesperson said: “We note that the special rapporteur commended UK legislation and policy to tackle direct and indirect racial discrimination, and that in her end of mission statement she welcomed the Race Disparity Audit as ‘a remarkable step towards transforming formal commitments to racial equality into reality’.

“We have made great progress, but the prime minister is clear that if there is no rational explanation for ethnic disparities, then we – as a society – must take action to change them. That is precisely what we will do.”

The government is believed to be particularly unhappy with the criticism of Prevent, with a source saying it was disappointing to see a “series of assertions that are not based on the reality of Prevent on the ground” adding that the programme was vital to tackling both Islamist and far-right terrorism

and denying it targeted a particular ethnic group.

The Home Office also pointed out that new home secretary Sajid Javid had made clear he would not use the term hostile environment, saying it “does not represent our values as a country.” However, it said the department was committed to a “compliant environment [which] protects the taxpayer and is based on principles of fairness.”

Deborah Coles, executive director of Inquest, which gives legal assistance to families whose loved ones have died in state custody, was among those who provided evidence to Achiume. She welcomed the rapporteur’s “strong statements”.

“The most extreme consequence of racial profiling is the question of disproportionate black deaths following use of force by police,” she said.

“The strength of her commentary around racial profiling and the consequences from over policing, criminalisation, and deaths from the use of force is something that the UK government has to address as a matter of urgency. Her comments are a forewarning of what will continue to happen if the state doesn’t address her concerns.”

Stafford Scott, of race relations charity The Monitoring Group, who also gave evidence to Achiume, welcomed comments from Achiume about how police gangs databases disproportionately skew towards identifying black young people as perpetrators of gang violence, and which he described as “part of the process that sets up our community to be viewed as a suspect community by the entire state.”

“That the United Nations are talking about England needing to have a policy that lays out a comprehensive strategy for the systemic and systematic elimination of unlawful racial disparities in the 21st century is disgraceful,” Scott said.

“England needs to consider how it now looks on the world stage, having voted for Brexit, and having had the UN rapporteur telling England that structural racism is still an everyday reality for black people.”

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