



Dear Amnesty activism community,

I hope this message finds you and your loved ones doing as well as one possibly can in these challenging times.

Spring is a time of promise, of renewal and fresh, new beginnings. This is my first message to you in the Activism Guide, and I would like to share both my hopes for Amnesty International in Canada (English-Speaking) [AICSES] and the challenges we must tackle together to achieve the kind of world we all believe in.

I do not need to tell you that we are facing turbulent times and a deep crisis of fundamental freedoms globally. Those who stand bravely for human rights are more at risk than ever. Those in power have and continue to fail the powerless. As I write these words, India is devastated by the impact of COVID-19, which could have been prevented or at least alleviated by timely, equitable and universal access to a vaccine. Many countries are facing a double pandemic: COVID-19 and the impact of structural neglect, inequity and inequality. Meanwhile those whose voices are least heard are continuously stripped of their rights and the international human rights system is struggling to uphold accountability globally. Our world has been brought to a standstill by a virus which ought to be driving us to reinvent a truly equitable, human rights-based order.

These realities are as true in Canada as they are globally. Covid-19 has exposed Canada's sharp and longstanding inequalities, and the deep work that remains for Indigenous, Black, racialized and marginalized peoples in particular to not only have their basic rights upheld, but to lead free and fulfilling lives.

As activists, although the work may feel overwhelming (where does one start, you may ask) this is not the time to be paralysed. "There is no time for despair, no place for self-pity, no need for silence, no room for fear" once wrote the wise and literary giant, Toni Morrison. These facts should not discourage us but fuel our resolve to pursue freedom and justice for all. We must continue to engage Canadian decision makers at all levels, speak truth to power and insist that human rights must prevail. That work must begin at home.



At the same time, we will not authentically and credibly be able to truly do so externally until we have built a movement and an organization which reflects these values internally. You may have learnt that over the past few months, our section has been undergoing deep challenges, coming to terms with systemic racism within. Several of our racialized colleagues and activists, both past and present, have come forward and shared that they have experienced or witnessed racism while working at one of our three English-speaking offices in Canada.

[Trigger warning] Some of these challenges were shared in a recent Vice News Media [article](#) and our Board's message addressing these is currently published on our [website](#). Regrettably but perhaps not surprisingly, these challenges are not just limited to the AICES branch. Another article was released in the [Guardian](#) about similar experiences of racialized staff in the UK section of Amnesty International as well as at Amnesty International's International Secretariate (IS). These facts and experiences are unacceptable for Amnesty. One experience of racism and harm is one too many for us and the values we stand for around the world.

Building a more inclusive movement—one that is actively anti-racist, intersectional, decolonial, feminist and which centers the voices, concerns, and solutions of rights holders—is a top priority for me and for our section. Respect, dignity, and justice are the benchmark of our movement, but they can only be so if they start within. This is the arduous but imperative journey we are embarking on, and we will be working hard to build the foundation of a truly anti-racist organisation in the coming months and years.

My personal definition of anti-racist movement is one that understands and acknowledges racism not just as an interpersonal issue. It is also a social and historical construct which for decades and centuries before us has deliberately denied opportunity, penalized, and exploited racialized people for the benefit of the white race. An anti-racist organization is aware that our social construct is purposely unequal, that white privilege is not accidental, that inequality is sustained through institutions and who runs them, and therefore seeks to deconstruct it at all levels: in the issues we work on, in our interpersonal relations, the issues we prioritize, how we budget and allocate our resources, how we fundraise, and how we relate to members and the communities of right-holders. It also means to be accountable and to measure our progress with rigor and data, and to be transparent with our team, membership, and Board. It is an organization



where everyone, in their beautiful and rich diversity, feels safe and brings their full humanity and selves.

In these challenging times, when our human rights advocacy work is more important than ever, our ability to demand justice depends on how just we are to ourselves. For that work to be effective and authentic, it must start within, in the intimacy of our circles and across our own movement. It is the right and essential thing to do.

I hope we can count on your support and I am confident that the movement will come out stronger and truer to our core values. Please keep in mind as our team immerses itself deeply and meaningfully in this important work, over the next months we will be scaling back some of our work to make room for this and so may not respond as you might be used to. In the meantime, I look forward to organizing more boldly, more creatively and more powerfully with you as we transform, evolve and gear up for the future.

In hope and solidarity,

Ketty Nivyabandi
Secretary General
Amnesty International Canada