

May 12, 2009

RACISM AND XENOPHOBIA CONFERENCE 2009

Worldwide, the UN is tackling the divisive and explosive issues of racism and human rights. As expected, the April 2009 conference in Geneva became very turbulent because of a provocative Israel-bashing speech by Iranian President Ahmedinejad. His abusive language caused many delegates to walk out and precipitated an unprecedented rebuke by the UN's habitually diplomatic Secretary General. As an additional attack, the speech came on Holocaust Memorial Day, April 20. All of this volatility created very poor press coverage which completely obscured the real purpose of the conference.

The original decision to boycott the conference by the US and other countries was taken because the 2009 Conference had approved the original document which some claimed equated Zionism with racism. This claim is inaccurate and deceptive. The original 2001 document had become confused in the public mind with the anti-Semitic statements of the NGO side conference. The official UN document completely rejected the sensational and hate-mongering statements. Thanks to the then High Commissioner of Human Rights, Mary Robinson, with the help of the delegate from South Africa, a well reasoned and morally acceptable document was drafted, with a plan for action.

This document expressed deep concern about both anti-Semitism and Islamophobia, and omitted reference to Israel as a racist state. The document expressed concern with the plight of the Palestinians and supported their right for self-determination, the right of security for all states including Israel, asked that the Holocaust never be forgotten, and called for support of the Middle East peace process.

In the current official UN 2009 follow-up to the 2001 conference, a number of Islamic countries brought up an effort to make defamation of religion a breach of human rights. Such a declaration would be a very serious threat to the precious right of freedom of expression. They did not succeed. The final document did not include the proposed references to defamation of religion or identify Israel as a racist state. Instead it focused strongly on freedom of expression.

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The positive tone of the document finally adopted was not at all reported in the mainstream press. The conference news disappeared rapidly from public attention.

The conference did have flaws. It did not adequately list the many situations of racism and human rights abuses worldwide, such as hostility and violence towards women, gays and the 250 million untouchables. Darfur was ignored in the final document.

There was discussion of the history of the terrible transatlantic slave trade, but it focused only on West African slaves shipped to the Americas and the Caribbean. There was no acknowledgement of the slave trade of North and East Africa across the Indian Ocean, involving mostly women. Westerners were not alone in the vice of the slave trade!

How best to respond to such serious divisions? The policy of a total boycott doesn't seem to be valid or useful. Almost all of those delegates who walked out during President Ahmedinejad's speech returned to work on drafting an ethical final document. In spite of the omissions, the final document was acceptable, though incomplete.

A more recent example of the possible benefits of participation is President Obama's decision, unlike former President Bush, to seek a US seat on the Human Rights Council. The new and severely flawed council is a permanent body organized on geographic, regional, and totally political lines. Hopefully, the voice of the US will be heard speaking out on the most explosive, divisive and usually neglected issues on the world scene.