

**ODUMUNC 2009 Issue Brief  
Third Committee (SOCHUM)  
Elimination of Racism  
And Racial Discrimination**



**“After the Race Conference:  
Relief, and Doubt Over Whether It Will Matter”**  
*Rachel L. Swarns (New York Times, September 10<sup>th</sup>, 2001)*

The diplomats scattered like the wind today, flying out of this port city with a 27-page action plan to combat discrimination and a staggering sense of relief that the United Nations conference on racism accomplished anything at all.

But victims of racism and intolerance around the world might be forgiven for wondering whether those printed stacks of promises will make much difference to ordinary people.

This conference grabbed headlines with its divisive debate over Israel's treatment of Palestinians and the bitter wrangling over a European apology for slavery.

The meeting also produced a plan on Saturday that calls on governments to ensure that Gypsies get equal access to education, that minorities are guaranteed religious freedom, that people with AIDS have access to services and that police agencies do not engage in racial or ethnic profiling, among other things.

The plan, adopted by 163 nations, is not legally binding. The United Nations will appoint a panel of five experts to help countries carry out the plan and to review progress to encourage officials to keep their commitments.

Human rights activists say that if governments follow through on even some of the suggestions, such as embarking on publicity campaigns to promote racial tolerance or teaching children about Africa's contributions to world history, it will help improve understanding across racial and ethnic lines.

"If governments would really put in place what they agreed to here, the world would be a much better place," said Reed Brody, the director of advocacy for Human Rights Watch.

Whether governments will actually make good on these commitments is far from certain. During the conference, many countries used their political muscle to ensure that they would not have to deal with prickly issues of race or discrimination.

India successfully lobbied fellow nations to prevent any mention of caste discrimination. Before walking out of the conference over criticism of Israel, the United States objected to any discussion of reparations for the descendants of African slaves. Others refused to consider gays as victims of discrimination.

While many presidents and foreign ministers delivered eloquent speeches condemning racism and intolerance, few were willing to publicly address discrimination within their own borders.

"These are very difficult issues, and every government feels vulnerable, and every government has things to hide and be ashamed of, so there's a collective discomfort," said Michael Posner, the executive director of the Lawyers Committee for Human Rights in New

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York.

Some Western officials have already dismissed the conference as useless and counterproductive. The Canadian foreign minister, John Manley, questioned why the meeting was necessary at all since officials seemed to be doing little more than exchanging platitudes or attacking Israel, whose delegates also abandoned the meeting.

"It hasn't been a good experience for the world community," Mr. Manley said last week. "It has not been a good experience for the United Nations and I hope we don't have to see this happen again."

Condoleezza Rice, President Bush's national security adviser, today criticized the conference for being too focused on the past and said that a debate about reparations was best avoided.

"I think reparations -- given the fact that there is plenty of blame to go around for slavery, plenty of blame to go around among African and Arab states, and plenty of blame to go around among Western states -- we are better to look forward and not point fingers backward," she said on the NBC News program "Meet the Press."

Though some have criticized the Bush administration's decision to walk out of the conference as a pretext to avoid the reparations issue, she defended the move. "This conference spent far too much time in trying to condemn Israel and single it out," she said. "I think the United States made the right decision to leave."

But diplomats from Europe and Latin America disagreed.

Brazil's secretary of state for human rights, Gilberto Saboia, said the international community has an obligation to grapple with past injustices.

"Slavery has been a tragedy for millions of people for centuries and continues to have consequences," said Mr. Saboia, who helped negotiate the final document on the issue.

"It doesn't mean we have to remain locked in the past," he added. "But we need to understand that past to address the present and to address the future."

With or without American participation, for the thousands of Africans, Gypsies, Kurds and others who gathered here last week, the conference provided an unprecedented opportunity to raise their concerns before the world.

Jyothi Raj, a Dalit, or member of the group in India once known as the untouchables, said she was disappointed that caste was not on the agenda. "We are not getting justice as we should," said Mrs. Raj, who said she is not allowed to enter temples in her village because she is considered unclean.

Still, Mrs. Raj said the conference was a big success for the Dalits. "Everywhere people are talking about Dalits," Mrs. Raj marveled. "We are feeling connected. We are not alone. We are battling together."

Blacks from the Americas and across the continent said they felt similarly when they shared experiences. Many were disappointed when European diplomats refused to apologize explicitly for the slavery, but they cheered the expression of profound remorse and the acknowledgment

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that the slave trade "should have always been" a crime against humanity.

Now, many blacks are mobilizing to seek reparations, to start scholarship funds or to create monuments to enslaved ancestors.

"We have never had the opportunity to gather together from every country," said Alioune Tine, a human rights activist from Senegal, who led a caucus of Africans and blacks in the Americas. "Now there is enthusiasm and commitment to remind states to meet their international obligations. That is the next step."

Mary Robinson, the United Nations commissioner for human rights, said no one should underestimate the importance of bringing so many people together or the difficulty governments faced in reaching an agreement to fight racism.

When negotiations over slavery and the Middle East threatened to break down last week, she said she feared the whole meeting would collapse. "We were hanging by a thread," Mrs. Robinson said in an interview today.

Mrs. Robinson, who is the secretary-general of the conference, has been sharply criticized for not resolving the sensitive issues around the Middle East and slavery before delegates arrived here. She acknowledged today that the conference would have been less tumultuous if such issues had been settled earlier.

But the important thing, she said, was that delegates managed to cobble together an agreement to fight racial discrimination in the end.

"We got a result and I think it will be very positive for human dignity," Mrs. Robinson said. "I'm not under any illusions. It won't make a difference just because we had a conference. It will be a long, long haul. But in the end, I think it was a truly remarkable achievement. Let history judge."

<http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9B04EFDF1738F933A2575AC0A9679C8B63&scp=1&sq=after+the+conference+swarns&st=nyt>

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**“At Risk of Early Derailment”  
*The Economist* (November 27<sup>th</sup>, 2008)**

The United Nations has high hopes of combating racial intolerance, and the violence it causes, with giant talkfests. One such gathering—a World Conference against Racism—took place in Durban in 2001. Preparations for a follow-up, to be held in Geneva next April, are in trouble. Two countries, Israel and Canada, have left the process; several others (all in the West) are threatening to do so unless the new meeting avoids the anti-Israel excesses which in their view marred the first one.

“Had we thought there could be some real value to this conference, we would not have walked out,” said Aharon Leshno-Yaar, Israel’s envoy in Geneva. “Israel must be in the forefront of any combat against racism. But the whole process has been hijacked by a group of radical countries wanting to shield themselves against criticism by heaping blame on the West.” Israel feared a repeat of the “hatred and extremism” that marked the 2001 meeting.

That gathering, with some 18,000 delegates, was certainly imperfect. A Palestinian *intifada* was raging and passions were high. The Israelis and Americans walked out early on, saying criticism of Israel was disproportionate. Europeans and other Westerners slogged on, finally producing an anodyne statement. Of 341 paragraphs, only six referred to Israel, the Palestinians, anti-Semitism or the Holocaust, none in an obviously objectionable way.

What gave the 2001 meeting a bad name, in the eyes of Israel and its friends, was the parallel NGO forum, whose final declaration was so strongly worded—equating Israel’s policies in the occupied territories with apartheid—that Mary Robinson, then UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, refused to endorse it or to transfer it to the main forum. In many minds, the two sessions—the official one and the NGO one—have become conflated into a single event, known by human-rights wonks as “Durban I”.

The whole thing was a “festival of hate and anti-Semitism”, says Hillel Neuer, head of UN Watch, a group that monitors the world body for perceived bias against Jews and Israel. He predicts the Geneva meeting will be just as bad. Its cause is not helped by the fact that it is being organised by the UN’s much-criticised Human Rights Council, with Libya chairing a preparatory panel that includes Iran, Cuba, Russia and Pakistan.

Some stridently anti-Israel views expressed by a group of Asian countries, and drafted mainly by Iran, have added to the mood of alarm. But the outcome of the 2009 meeting may prove less extreme. The Asian paper is just one of five regional contributions, none of which will see the light of day in its current form. Line-by-line haggling will start in January, with the aim of producing a much shorter final declaration with some hope of winning consensus.

When Canada left in January, it said it would not be “party to an anti-Semitic, anti-Western hatefest dressed up as an anti-racism conference”. Israel followed on November 19th. America, Australia, France, Britain, the Netherlands, Poland, Slovenia and the Czech Republic may also

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quit unless things change. Others, like Germany, Spain, Austria, Belgium and the Scandinavians seem keener to try influencing the tone from inside.

Some people question the idea of a global discussion of an issue as diffuse as racism. After all, they say, little was gained by the 2001 show or by anything that followed. Others, like Gay McDougall, an American who is the UN's independent expert on minorities, disagree. She deems it significant that in 2001 almost all governments admitted that racism existed in their own societies, and notes that in 2009 countries will be held to account for pledges made in Durban; only then can the process be judged. Sceptics are unwilling to wait.

[http://www.economist.com/world/international/displaystory.cfm?story\\_id=12705743](http://www.economist.com/world/international/displaystory.cfm?story_id=12705743)

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**Resources**

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