

Op-ed by Navanethem Pillay, United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights published in the Guardian (16 December 2008) and Haaretz (17 December 2008)

Nations must unite against racism

The Durban conference offers the opportunity for states to work together to combat intolerance

I grew up in Durban under a system of apartheid that institutionalized racial discrimination, denying equal rights of citizenship to all those who were not white. I later sat as a judge on the Rwanda tribunal where I came to know in painful detail, killing by killing, the unimaginable destruction of humanity when ethnic hatred exploded into genocide. I know that the consequences of allowing discrimination, inequality and intolerance to fester and spiral out of control can be genocidal. But South Africa's experience shows with political will and a commitment to act, discrimination, inequality and intolerance can be overcome. We have just witnessed the election of the first African-American president of the United States, a country where racial segregation is as live a memory for some as it is for me.

States will have an opportunity to demonstrate their determination to fight intolerance by moving the anti-racism agenda forward when, in April 2009, an international review conference meets in Geneva. The conference will evaluate the implementation of commitments governments made seven years ago in Durban to eradicate racial hatred and discrimination. It is imperative that all states participate and contribute to this crucial process in order to consolidate and improve the common ground on fundamental human rights issues we all agree on.

Regrettably, last January Canada announced its intention to withdraw from the Durban review conference. And this month, so did Israel.

Behind these decisions stands the controversy that tainted the 2001 Durban Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance and that was caused by the antisemitic behaviour of some non-governmental organisations at the sidelines of the conference. Yet the document that emerged from the conference itself, the Durban Declaration and Programme of Action (DDPA), transcended divisive and intolerant approaches.

The DDPA offers a comprehensive global framework that calls for the adoption of more effective anti-discrimination laws and policies. It highlights discrimination against minorities, migrants, and indigenous people, and it empowers civil society to demand accountability for actions committed or omitted by strengthening victims' grounds for recourse.

The DDPA clearly states that: "The Holocaust must never be forgotten." It calls for an end to violence in the Middle East and recognises Israel's right to security. It urges Israelis and Palestinians to resume the peace process and expresses deep concern about

the increase in antisemitism around the world, as well as alarm over mounting prejudice related to religious beliefs, including Islamophobia.

In April 2009, at the Durban review conference, states are expected to provide an assessment of achievements and gaps in the implementation of the commitments made in 2001, as well as identify concrete ways to improve performance and impact on the ground. The review is also meant to share and take ownership of good practices in the fight against racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance. It is an important opportunity to renew global commitment to our common goals and revitalise efforts to move towards these goals. All too often national policies and practices lag behind states' pledges. Yet progress in combating racism and intolerance is sorely needed in every region of the world.

The Durban review conference is a timely opportunity to reaffirm the principles of non-discrimination and to build on the Durban Declaration and Programme of Action. It is for states to ensure that this objective is met and implementation gaps are closed. If all states are not engaged in the process, this goal may remain elusive. Thus, the concerns expressed by Canada and Israel that the review conference will become a platform for denigrating Israel must be assuaged. Seven years ago, states did so by elevating the conference's outcome above the hatred and hostility that took place on its periphery, and by reaching a broad agreement on the necessary measures to combat racism and intolerance. They must achieve that commonality of purpose again through active engagement rather than withdrawal.

We owe a frank debate and concrete action to the victims of discrimination, intolerance and racism. We can avoid or overcome friction by focusing on how to give new momentum to the struggle against these unconscionable practices. States have a responsibility to show leadership against racial discrimination and intolerance. What message does a state boycott send to those who are suffering from racism? What message does it send to those who perpetuate racism? This struggle concerns all of us in our increasingly multi-cultural and multi-ethnic societies.