

Durban Review Conference



**Opening Statement of Ms. Navanethem Pillay
United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights**

Geneva, 20 April 2009

Mr. Secretary-General,
Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

I wish to offer you a very warm welcome to the Durban Review Conference and to thank the Preparatory Committee for having entrusted me with the great honour and privilege to serve as its Secretary-General.

As the performance we have just enjoyed joyfully showed, our main reason for gathering here today is to engage in a celebration of tolerance and diversity: this is the imperative and overarching goal that must motivate us above narrowly-focused political considerations and calculations. On behalf of the countless victims of racial discrimination all over the world, I salute you for your principled participation in this conference. I am confident that our work at the Durban Review Conference will represent a historic milestone in the fight against racism. Our work will ultimately convince all those Member States who chose to stay away to rejoin our efforts on the anti-racism agenda at a later stage of this ongoing process.

We have travelled a very long road to get here. I am heartened by the commitment to the issues at stake that your presence here today demonstrates. I would like to express my appreciation to the Chairperson of the Preparatory Committee, under whose able stewardship the preparatory process was guided. I would also like to congratulate the Chairperson of the Inter-sessional Working Group, whose formidable task was to steer negotiations over the draft outcome document of the Durban Review Conference.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Racism and racial discrimination attack the very foundations of a person's dignity, for they seek to divide the human family into categories of people, some of which are considered more worthy than others. Discrimination in all its aspects must be denounced and forcefully rejected every time it rears its odious head, whether in the guise of political opportunism, cultural mores or specious arguments presented as scientific evidence. History has proved time and again that, when allowed to take root, discrimination, racism and intolerance shatter the very foundations of societies and damage them for generations. I know this through my personal experience of growing up and living in apartheid South Africa. And I know first-hand the destructive force of institutionalized racism.

Even though guarantees of non-discrimination are enshrined in every international human rights standard, laws in some countries, and practice in many, in all regions of the world, still permit or tolerate discrimination. By the same token, our cumulative knowledge of the pernicious effects of intolerance, oppression and subjugation, acquired through centuries and across continents, has yet to stamp out racism.

Indeed, racial discrimination is one of the most widely occurring human rights violations and may even be intensifying as a result of resurgent prejudices and fear, as well as competition over scarce resources and employment opportunities. It is frequently inherent in the asymmetry of power relations in a society. It exploits and perverts the human desire to belong, the legitimate aspirations to a cultural, historical and psychological space that preserves and nurtures one's identity.

Distinguished Participants,

Eight years ago, in Durban, South Africa, the struggle against racial hatred, discrimination and intolerance moved forward when States adopted by consensus the Durban Declaration and Programme of Action. The DDPA, as it is known, constitutes the most comprehensive international platform to fight racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance. The hopes of millions of victims are pinned on the implementation of this document, but the noblest charter is reduced to empty rhetoric if the commitments it enshrines are given no practical effect. We now need to take stock and assess to what extent the solemn pledges States made in 2001 have been realized. At the same time, we need a clearer understanding of persisting gaps in protection, as well as willful negligence, in the implementation of the DPPA.

As I highlighted in my contribution to the Durban Review Conference, the implementation of the DDPA has been affected by a number of challenges. The World Conference in 2001 emphasized that poverty, underdevelopment, marginalization, social exclusion and economic disparities are closely associated with racism, and contribute to the persistence of racist attitudes and practices. In turn, each and all of these factors perpetuate vicious cycles of exclusion and poverty undermining simultaneously human rights, development, and security.

In our era of deepening interaction and mutual learning among people of different origins, and in a context of heightened political awareness and civic activism around the world, common strategies are most effectively pursued when anchored in the protection and promotion of universal human rights without discrimination of any kind. This noted, I hasten to add that such growing and ultimately enriching variety of backgrounds merging in communities around the world also presents a mounting challenge to States, as they seek to promote and ensure mutual respect, social harmony, equal opportunities and fairness of treatment for all.

Regrettably, those that are identified as the "others"—particularly migrant workers—are also and all too often perceived as predatory competitors, rather than as additional contributors of talent, hard work, and ingenuity to the wealth and welfare of receiving communities.

Moreover, the response of many countries to legitimate security concerns in the context of the fight against terrorism has had a negative and disproportionate impact on minority groups within multi-ethnic and multicultural societies, leading to instances of discrimination and stigmatization of different types of vulnerable groups.

The convergence of the global food emergency, the economic and financial crises, and the effects of climate change has exacerbated entrenched prejudices and tensions or brought to the surface latent intolerance. In some cases this has unleashed racist attacks.

At their worst and when used to serve the purposes of supremacist political agendas, the manipulation of perceptions of diversity stoked long, drawn out armed conflicts, as well as the sudden flaring up of violent communal strife with serious violations of international human rights and international humanitarian law. In the most egregious cases, such violations reached the proportions of war crimes, crimes against humanity and even genocide.

Excellencies,

These towering challenges demand that we pursue the objectives of this Review Conference with a commensurate sense of responsibility. I have repeatedly called for the full participation of all UN Member States in this process. I have appealed to all States never to lose sight of the overall goal of the conference, that is, the goal of attaining discrimination-free societies. Such a compelling objective must override differences and reconcile diverse perspectives.

We all should be mindful that a failure to agree on the way forward would negatively reverberate on the human rights agenda for years to come. I wish to underscore that each and every one of us has a stake in the fight against racism.

Distinguished Participants,

I am encouraged by the progress that has been achieved during the Preparatory Committee and which produced a heavily negotiated and carefully balanced draft outcome document for the consideration of, and adoption by, the Review Conference. Last Friday, I warmly congratulated delegates for reaching agreement on the present text for the Review Conference. Indeed, all regional groups and many countries have travelled an extra mile to ensure that the ground of discussion would reflect goals and roadmaps which all participants could share. They made concessions in order to reach a widely acceptable agreement on the document the Preparatory Committee laboured on. In particular, I would like to express gratitude to the delegation of Palestine and to the Organisation of the Islamic Conference for the flexibility they have displayed on issues of such crucial importance to them.

Member States began this process with divergent views but have so far remained committed to the goal of finding a way forward together to tackle the scourge of racism. It has not been an easy process, but in the document before you today, Member States have managed to address key issues in the fight against racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance. I am convinced that the draft outcome document under your consideration is a carefully balanced and yet meaningful outcome which will

generate concrete steps to address the plight of the many victims of racism throughout the world. This is why we are here.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Not everyone has chosen to attend this Conference, yet I am confident that it will be a success. I also hope that all Member States who, to my deep regret, did not participate would still join efforts to make tangible changes in the lives of so many victims of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance in all parts of the world.

This week we have the opportunity to take a significant step forward in the fight against racism, a fight that serves the interest of justice, dignity and equality everywhere. The eyes of the world are upon us. We will be judged harshly indeed should this historic opportunity not be fully seized. I am confident that this will not be the case. The victims of racism deserve no less.

Thank you.