

HIGHLIGHTS OF PRE-SESSIONAL DURBAN REVIEW CONFERENCE PANEL DISCUSSION

This morning, United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights Navi Pillay chaired a Durban Review Conference pre-sessional panel discussion entitled "United Against Racism". The panellists were Stephane Hessel, Member of the French Resistance, Holocaust Survivor and drafter of the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights; Berthe Kayitesi, a survivor of the Rwandan Genocide; and Gay McDougall, the first holder of the post of Independent Expert on minority issues.

The High Commissioner said that she felt that she shared much with each of the three panellists in terms of personal experience and in terms of professional exposure. "All of us have overcome or have witnessed ostensibly different forms of racial discrimination and intolerance", she said, adding that combating such shameful practices was a task of the highest magnitude.

Speaking about the preparatory process for the Durban Review Conference, Ms. Pillay noted that they had endeavoured to rise above divergences in opinions and points of view to ensure that the anti-racism debate would take place, and hopefully progress, through a frank exchange which was open to a diverse spectrum of voices.

Mr. Hessel said that in this afflicted world it was vital to work together to find again a momentum of hope and confidence between all members of the United Nations. No organization had so much contributed as the United Nations to making nations and people fully aware of the necessity to combat any forms of discrimination against any member of the human family. The new challenges could only be solved hand-in-hand. The first important step was to ensure the survival of our species and to ensure that economic, social and cultural rights be further protected.

Ms. Kayitesi said that in her country, people had been killed not because of anything they had done but just because they had been born. When there was a genocide that was taking place, it was the right to life that was trampled on. Genocide was not something that sprang up suddenly, but it was the result of a very long process of dehumanization. Jews had been called the rats and the Tutsis had been called the cockroaches. No one in the world could choose their parents or where they were born.

For Ms. Kayitesi the 1994 Rwanda Genocide had been the greatest crime; it was the final result of years of discrimination. It was perhaps difficult for the audience to understand what she meant when she was saying today that she had lost a part of her life during the Genocide. All of her friends and family members had been killed. In some families there had been no survivors. The Genocide had taken away what had been their prior life. The survivors had had to learn to live again and to start from nothing. But many children had been stripped of a fundamental right; the right to say "mother" or "father".

Ms. McDougall said that the road from Durban I to Durban II had been long and hard. What had been gained in Durban had been an enormous step forward: a renewed commitment to equality expressed by a vast majority of the world's States. Governments had declared that the fight against racism was an international priority for all nations. Within the chambers of the United Nations, the tragedy of racism was often described in broad and at times impersonal terms. But the reality could be found in countless personal tragedies and struggles faced every day by individuals, families and communities in every country. The global scope of the problem was made visible through personal stories.

Racial discrimination was not only individual acts of prejudice, it was also manifested in the unequal and unfair treatment of entire groups of people, be it in the form of economic marginalization, bias within the criminal justice system, or the denial of cultural rights and ancestral lands, said Ms. McDougall.