

**STATEMENT OF THE PRESIDENT OF THE HUMAN RIGHTS COUNCIL  
ON THE OCCASION OF THE OPENING CEREMONY OF THE DURBAN REVIEW  
CONFERENCE**

Geneva, 20 April 2009

Mr. President,  
Mr. Secretary-General,  
Director-General of the UN Office in Geneva,  
Madam High Commissioner for Human Rights,  
Excellencies,  
Distinguished delegates,  
Representatives of civil society,  
Ladies and gentlemen,

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The belief in the inherent superiority of a particular race is not only immoral but has proved a particularly dangerous ideology in human history. Such beliefs deny the self-evident truth that all men are born free and equal in dignity and rights. It denies justice and equal opportunities to the victims of hate and bigotry, including the respect and happiness every person is entitled to enjoy as a human being. Despite its manifest ugliness, the repulsive creed that ethnicity must determine the worth of the human person has persisted through the ages.

2. Racism has historically been a devious, treacherous and deceitful practice. It remains so today. As an ideology, it justifies persecutions, oppression and death. It has fostered systems of legal segregation in the form of institutional racism, effectively discriminating against populations and entrenching economic and social exclusion. Regardless of its form - whether scientific, ideological, institutional, economic or social - racism has precipitated some of the most heinous crimes ever, including slavery, apartheid, and most cases of genocide.

3. Through the instrumentality of the United Nations, the international community has responded to the challenge of racism through robust efforts to establish principles and mechanisms that seek to set high moral standards for human conduct and to guard against racism in all its manifestations. These mechanisms have served as important tools to fight ignorance and disregard for cultural and ethnic diversities. To the extent that these mechanisms have helped to prevent racist practices that cause rancour, hostility and even open and violent conflicts, they have made important contributions to a just and peaceful world.

Mr. President,

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4. One of the more significant efforts in this direction is the International Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination (ICERD), which was adopted in 1965 and entered into force four years after. Building on that, the Committee on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination (CERD) was established to monitor the implementation of the Convention by its State Parties. Ever since, various efforts have been made at the international, regional and national levels, all aimed at promoting universal adherence to the provisions of this important Convention. It is fair to say today that if the scourge of racism and all forms of racial discrimination has yet to be eradicated, it is certainly not due to absence of appropriate mechanisms to address this evil, but perhaps rather because of lack of adequate political resolve on the part of governments.

5 Those who are victims of racism, those who have suffered the indignities of apartheid and the expropriations of colonialism understand, perhaps more than most others, the pains of discrimination. These are historical wrongs and the victims are real people with blood in their veins, just like anyone else. Some of the victims will wear their scars to their graves but they are not bitter. For them, it is sufficient that their plight be duly recognised as the historical truth that it is. For them, the healing phrase "never again" will be enough. This is why part of the healing process, which is precisely what we are engaged in at this conference, must include empathy with the victims. When the world finally overcame slavery, colonialism and apartheid, it sent a strong message that it can overcome divisions in pursuit of high principles. With greater resolve and determination, we can consolidate on these achievements by uprooting all the vestiges of these obnoxious practices.

6. It is proper, at this juncture, to recall the introductory paragraph of the Durban Declaration and Programme of Action of the World Conference Against Racism, held in 2001, which says inter alia "*Although the standard of non-discrimination has been established as a bedrock principle of international law, the persistence of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance clearly demonstrates the need to look for new ways to address this problem with more resolve, with more humanity and with greater efficiency.*" The DDPA also recognizes that poverty, underdevelopment, marginalization, social exclusion and economic disparities are among the root causes of discrimination. Such recognition is particularly relevant today against the backdrop of the current economic and financial crises. As the consequences of the economic meltdown deepens across the globe, it is essential for concerted efforts to be made to guarantee the protection of these vulnerable populations from discrimination and intolerance.

7. The Durban outcome, one may add, was just a continuation of the long journey towards stamping out racism. As we seek to rid the world of this scourge, the Durban Review Conference should take us several steps further in the fight against discrimination in all its forms. Important efforts in this direction have already been made by all engaged in the Review Process. I would like to specially acknowledge the worthwhile efforts of the Chairperson of the Preparatory Committee and the Chairman of the Inter-Sessional Open-Ended Working Group, both of who worked hard to provide solid bases for constructive negotiations at this conference. The active engagement of the High Commissioner for Human Rights has also been crucial to the achievements that have been reached so far. All that remains for us to do in the days ahead is to ensure that our search for consensus is conducted within the bounds of civility, decorum and respect for different viewpoints.

Mr. President,

8. Partly deriving from history, but no less reinforced by present day realities, all stakeholders have a responsibility to actively drive the process of the fight against racism by embracing all international, regional or national mechanisms which seek to achieve this goal. The Review Conference offers us the opportunity to consolidate on the gains of the DDPA, and also to ensure that the world is rid of all manifestations of inequality, exploitation, poverty and prejudices in whatever form they may appear. It is only by so doing that we can justify the sacrifices of all those who had bravely stood against despicable acts of racism, racial injustice and other forms of discrimination. Many of them laid down their lives in the cause of this noble fight. It is my sincere hope that this conference will be able to honour their efforts and memory by taking a robust and unequivocal stand against racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance.

I thank you.