

Commemoration of the Durban Conference (2001) at the UN General Assembly,  
22 September 2011  
Statement by Belgium

President,  
Excellencies,  
Ladies and gentlemen,

10 years have passed since the World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance. Belgium would like to reiterate its strong belief in tolerance and, non-discrimination, in freedom of expression, and freedom of thought. We are convinced that a continuing dialogue on these issues can guide us to overcome differences in perceptions and ideas.

Racism and intolerance know no boundaries. Worldwide, people are confronted with racist declarations as well as discrimination based on ethnic origin, religion or belief, gender, sexual orientation, disability or social position. I do not agree with those who would limit the concept of discrimination to certain continents or to people of certain descent. We all need to do more to eliminate intolerance, and to ensure that those who incite hatred or violence against other individuals are dealt with by the law.

Belgium is firmly convinced that all forms of discrimination should be tackled. Countries that are in the process of shaping a new future and drafting a new constitution could be inspired by other national legislations. In Europe, legislation on gender equality for example, has taken decennia to take form. In Belgium, our legal framework on discrimination and racism is based on three different laws, complemented with a wide-ranging action plan and dedicated institutions to implement these laws.

The Belgian laws and institutions are among the most advanced in Europe in the fight against racism and intolerance, and combined with the European legislation, are powerful tools allowing for prosecution and condemnation of racist, intolerant and xenophobic acts, including in the political sphere or on the internet.

Nevertheless, repression and punishment are not and will never offer the only solution to successfully fight racism. States need to take positive measures, in particular in education and public information, to foster and promote tolerance between people, whether ethnic or religious groups.

As you know, my country has played an important role in the Durban processes of 2001 and 2009. Belgium remains committed to this process that has been affected by controversy from the start. As High Commissioner Mme Pillay said this morning, the global response to racism must not be clouded by politics. Some countries are not present here today. I am convinced however, that taking part in the dialogue is a more effective way for our message to be heard.

The international community needs to seek unity of purpose and overcome disagreement to collectively tackle the scourge of racism and discrimination. This fight should be a global and encompassing effort, and should not single out a specific region or country. Because our common message will be fatally weakened if we narrow the debate.

I would like to recall the first sentence of the Universal Declaration on Human Rights, recognizing ‘the inherent dignity and the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family as the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world.’

The word ‘dignity’ should guide us today as we have the opportunity to increase the dignity of all human beings. We should keep in mind that no-one can be discriminated against, whether this discrimination is based on the colour of their skin, their gender, religion, sexual orientation or social position.

Victims of discrimination, racism or hate need to be protected in a context of respect for universal and fundamental human rights, including the freedom of expression, the freedom of association and the freedom of religion or belief. The fight against racism can not be an excuse to curtail or encroach on political and civil rights.

Last but not least, I would also like to remind us on the crucial importance of the Convention of the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, which is the cornerstone of the fight against intolerance. The CERD Committee is the centre of excellence to analyse country situations and to promote positive measures. I would like to take this opportunity to call upon all countries to ratify this convention.

Thank you, Chair.

Steven VANACKERE

Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs  
of the Kingdom of Belgium