

Equality , justice , dignity

The World Conference against racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance

During the last fifty years since the adoption in 1948 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the international community has made some important advances in the fight against racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance. National and international laws have been enacted and numerous international human rights instruments, particularly a treaty to ban racial discrimination, have been adopted. Progress has been made -witness the defeat of apartheid in South Africa. Yet, the dream of a world free of racial hatred and bias remains only half fulfilled.

As technology brings the peoples of the world closer together and political barriers tumble, racial discrimination, xenophobia and other forms of intolerance continue to ravage our societies. Horrors such as "ethnic cleansing" have emerged in recent years, while ideas of racial superiority have spread to new media like the Internet. Even globalization carries risks that can lead to exclusion and increased inequality, very often along racial and ethnic lines.

As racial discrimination and ethnic violence grow in complexity, they become more of a challenge for the international community. As a result, new tools to deal with racism are called for. "This World Conference has the potential to be among the most significant gatherings at the start of this century," the Secretary-General of the Conference and High Commissioner for Human Rights, Mary Robinson, stated. "It can be more: it can shape and embody the spirit of the new century, based on the shared conviction that we are all members of one human family."

Meeting the challenge at the millennium

In 1997, the General Assembly decided, in resolution 52/111, to hold the World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance. The World Conference which will be held in Durban, South Africa from 31 August to 7 September 2001, will be a landmark in the struggle to eradicate all forms of racism "requiring a strong follow-up mechanism to examine whether Governments have delivered on their promises made," according to the High Commissioner. She promised "to make it a conference of actions not just words." The World Conference is a unique opportunity to create a new world vision for the fight against racism in the twenty-first century.

The Preparatory process

The United Nations Commission on Human Rights is acting as the preparatory committee for the World Conference. Prior to the Conference, two preparatory intergovernmental meetings are planned. The first was held in Geneva from 1 to 5 May 2000, and the second will be held from 21 May to 1 June 2001, also in Geneva. At the first meeting, governments took a number of organizational decisions, including the adoption of the provisional agenda for the Conference and its draft rules of procedure. Member States also held informal consultations in January where they took stock of the recommendations of six experts seminars that took place in the last two years. They also discussed the draft declaration and programme of action, to be adopted by the Conference.

During 1999 and 2000 six regional experts seminars were held in: Geneva, Warsaw, Bangkok, Addis Ababa and Santiago de Chile. The objectives of each seminar was to discuss the issues of priority concern for that region, to advance the regional dialogue on racism, raise awareness, share information on the issues of racism and intolerance and to share "best practices".

The experts seminars focused on issues such as refugees and multi-ethnic states, remedies available to victims, protection of minorities, migrants and trafficking of persons, ethnic conflicts and economic and social

measures for vulnerable groups.

Regional intergovernmental meetings are also being held. During the year 2000, European countries met in Strasbourg in October; the meeting for the Americas was held in Santiago de Chile in December; the African regional preparatory meeting took place in Dakar in January 2001; and the meeting of the Asian group was held in Tehran in February 2001.

Non-governmental organizations have adopted a similar preparatory process worldwide.

The Provisional Agenda

The elements of the provisional agenda are to be grouped under the following themes:

Theme 1: Sources, cause, forms and contemporary manifestations of racism, racial discrimination and related intolerance;

Theme 2: Victims of racism, racial discrimination and related intolerance;

Theme 3: Measures of prevention, education and protection aimed at the eradication of racism, racial discrimination and related intolerance at the national, regional and international levels;

Theme 4: Provision for effective remedies, recourses, redress, [compensatory] and other measures at the national, regional and international levels;

Theme 5: Strategies to achieve full and effective equality, including international cooperation and enhancement of the United Nations and other international mechanisms in combating racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia.

The bracket in theme 4 indicates that a consensus could not be reached on the word "compensatory".

Global Action against Racism

Since its creation, the United Nations has struggled to find measures to combat racial discrimination and ethnic violence. This commitment to human dignity and equality is reflected in its adoption of a number of resolutions, conventions and declarations, including:

- **Convention of the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide - 1948** Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide
- **Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination - 1963**
- **International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination - 1965**
- **21 March designated International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination - 1966**
- **International Convention on the Suppression and Punishment of the Crime of Apartheid - 1973** Apartheid.
- First Decade to Combat Racism and Racial Discrimination **1973-1982**
- First World Conference to Combat Racism and Racial Discrimination, Geneva **1978**
- Second World Conference to Combat Racism and Racial Discrimination, also in Geneva **1983**
- Second Decade for Action to Combat Racial Discrimination **1983-1992**
- Third Decade to Combat Racism and Racial Discrimination **1994-2003**
- World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance **2001**

The International Year

In 1998, the General Assembly decided to proclaim 2001 as the International Year of Mobilization against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance. This observance will help to draw world attention to the objectives of the Conference and to provide a momentum for further political commitment to the elimination of racism and racial discrimination.

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