

Durban II: Politicizing Racism

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Global Research, March 13, 2009

13 March 2009

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Many countries are set to participate in the Conference against Racism, scheduled to be held in Geneva , April 20-25. But the highly touted international meet is already marred with disagreement after Israel , the United States and other countries decided not to participate. Although the abstention of four or more countries is immaterial to the proceedings, the US decision in particular was meant to render the conference 'controversial', at best.

The US government's provoking stance is not new, but a repetition of another fiasco which took place in Durban , South Africa in 2001.

Israeli and US representatives stormed out in protest of the "anti-Israeli" and the "anti-Semitic" sentiments that supposedly pervaded the World Conference against Racism (WCAR), held in Durban in 2001. The decision was an ominous sign, for the Bush Administration was yet to be tested on foreign policy in any definite terms, as the conference concluded on September 8, three days before the 911 terrorist attacks.

The US justified its denunciation of the international forum, then on the very same, unsubstantiated grounds cited by Israel , that the forum was transformed to a stage for anti-Israeli and anti-Semitic rhetoric.

But was "the World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and related intolerance" indeed transformed into a stage for racism and bigotry, as Israel 's friends, lead amongst them the Bush Administration, charged?

What indeed took place at the conference was democracy in its best manifestations, where no country could defy international consensus with the use of a veto power, or could flex its economic muscles to bend the will of the international community. The result was, of course, disturbing from the view point of those who refuse to treat all United Nations member states with equity and impartiality. An African demand for a separate apology from every country that benefited from slavery, to every African nation that suffered from slavery was considered excessive, and eventually discounted.

But the main "controversial" issue that led to the US representative's departure from the conference was the criticism by many countries of Israel 's racism against the Palestinians. A majority of countries called for reinstating UN General Assembly resolution 3379 which in 1975 equated Zionism with racism.

The conference, then, was not meant to only address the issue of Palestine and Israel . However, the strong American resistance to any criticism of the racially motivated practices of the Israeli state - the extreme violence, the land theft, the Wall, the settlements, the protracted military occupation, etc - pushed the issue to center stage.

The Palestinian struggle is not meant to overshadow the struggles of oppressed nations around the world, but it rather compliments the calls for rights, freedom and liberation that continue to echo around the globe. However, the fact that the illegal and violent mass oppression of Palestinians, as practiced openly by the Israeli state continue unabated – and is rather defended and justified by the United States and other European powers – highlights the historical legacy championed by former colonial powers throughout the so-called third world for so many years.

There are hardly many international forums that are held and governed by principals of equality and fairness amongst nations. The World Conference against Racism is one of very few, indeed. It was not a surprise, therefore, to witness the international solidarity with the Palestinian and world-wide repulsion of the racist and Apartheid policies carried out daily by Israel .

But the mere censure of Israel 's unfair, undemocratic and racist policies – let alone taking any action to bring them to a halt – is mechanically considered anti-Semitic from an Israeli standpoint and US administrations.

The US conditioned its participation of the April conference in Geneva (Durban II) by removing any specific censure of Israel , and ensuring that Israel is not 'singled out' for criticism. Although US sensibilities constantly expect, but demand the singling out of any country, leader or group it deems rouge, war criminal, or terrorist, Israel is treated based on different standards. "A bad document became worse, and the US decided not to participate in the conference", Israeli daily, Haaretz, reported in reference to the draft documents being finalized before the conference.

The original "bad" document apparently dubs Israel "an occupying state that carries out racist policies", a description which is consistent with international law, UN resolutions and the views of leading world human rights defenders – Archbishop Desmond Tutu, John Dugard, the former UN Special Rapporteur for the Palestinian Territories, Richard Falk, the current UN's envoy, among many others.

The 'bad document' might have 'became worse' with new references to the Gaza bloodbath, which killed and wounded nearly 7,000 Palestinians in 22-days.

From an American – and unfortunately, Canadian and Italian, so far – viewpoint, such inhumane practices don't warrant a pause or mere words of condemnation. The same, of course, doesn't apply to Sudan , Zimbabwe , Iran , Cuba and other 'unfriendly' nations. The US decision must be particularly disheartening to African nations who saw in the advent of Barack Obama some vindication. The US first black president, however, saw it fit to boycott a conference that intended to discuss the issue of slavery and repatriation, to once again prove that race alone is hardly sufficient in explaining US internal and external policies.

A day after rebuffing the conference, US Secretary of State, Hilary Clinton arrived on her first visit to the Middle East , where she admonished Iran , Hamas and Hizbollah – for largely posing threats to Israel – and praised the Jewish state and its 'moderate' allies.

She remarked in a joint statement with Israeli president Shimon Peres, on March 3: "It is important that the United States always underscore our unshakeable, durable, fundamental relationship and support for the State of Israel. I will be going from here to Yad VaShem to pay respects to the lost souls, to remember those who the Holocaust took, to lay a wreath,

and to say a prayer.”

Needless to say, Mrs. Clinton refused to visit Gaza , where 1.5 million people are trapped in one large concentration camp, denied access to food, medicine, political and human rights.

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