

# International bodies and rhetoric

**T**wo issues dominated the UN World Conference Against Racism—the Middle East and slavery. During the eight months of preparation leading up to it, the United States and its allies had lobbied hard to influence the outcome, but without success. The withdrawal of the United States and Israel from the Conference several days before the final declaration was formally adopted meant that they were also unable to influence those assembled there. After eight days of negotiations the UN conference on Racism concluded on Saturday September 08, 2001. A negotiated, official declaration was adopted. The declaration recognized the Palestinian's right to an independent state and described slavery as a crime against humanity. This was a considerable achievement because some of the most powerful states of the world community worked very hard to prevent such an outcome.

In international forums all means are used to create ineffective alternatives to natural solutions and prevent the dissemination of ideas that threaten the status quo. Two decades ago it would not have been possible to hold a UN Conference of this nature on the subject of Racism (and slavery). Consideration of these subjects at earlier international moots on related matters, was differently worded and poorly publicized. This is not surprising if we consider the fact that just over two decades ago Mr. Nelson Mandela of South Africa was considered a terrorist by the Conservative government of the United Kingdom. Overtly, things have changed but there are still many others like him who have been, and continue to be, classified as such (terrorists) by the US, UK, their official allies in the West, the Middle East, Asia and by the global network of multinational business which promotes official policy.

There is concern that UN conferences are more about rhetoric, publicity and cornering development funds than anything else. Those who attend the official Conference are nominees of member states and bound to reflect the views of their governments. Governments closely observe their nominees and private individuals at associated non-governmental gatherings. Those nominees and private individuals at associated non-governmental gatherings, who faithfully toe the official line, or the line espoused by major donor countries, can expect an easy berth on the UN assistance bandwagon for decades to come. However, put a foot wrong and you are branded: a delegate who merely picked up some pamphlets about Cuba at a 1970's UN Conference was blackballed thereafter and resolutely excluded from follow-up activities.

The development of strategies to advance the objectives of UN conferences is seldom given the importance it deserves because the enunciation of a consensus position on the issues under consideration is necessary before the identification of universal goals and objectives. Those involved are far too busy getting the language of official declarations right to work on strategies for the future. It is not unusual, therefore, to find concern that enough attention was not given at the recent Conference on Racism to how

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the objectives of the Conference would be achieved. It is likely to take a great deal of imagination to develop officially acceptable strategies and action plans to promote the objectives of this particular conference and to make an effort to eradicate the many forms of discrimination that are practised today.

Away from the public eye international organizations generally nominate sub-committees, special groups and eminent individuals to evaluate the outcome of major events and suggest ways and means of improving performance. Unfortunately, far too many of those involved in such exercises these days are interested parties, sensitive to the personal risks involved in straying too far from what is known to be internationally acceptable. A new approach is needed in order to make a difference and bring about qualitative changes that will protect the interests of weaker members of the international community, multilat-



**Palestinian-Israeli contact at the UN Conference on Racism in Durban. Do such conferences serve any purpose beyond such rhetoric and publicity?**

eral organizations and alliances. Multiple options for translating ideas into generally acceptable strategies and action plans need to be considered. This is all the more essential now that the number of independent states in the world has increased.

A dramatic increase in the number of independent states took place during the 1980's and 1990's. As a result the membership of international, and many multilateral, organizations expanded rapidly. This led to new patterns of activity within the United Nations and other international organizations that can be, and have been, used to further international humanitarian goals. The newly independent Baltic states, the East and Central European states and Central Asian states of the former Soviet Union are all keen to join mainstream international activity through established economic, political as well as military alliances such as the EU and NATO. Each state offers opportunities for optimizing such alliances through its unique geographical, economic, social and cultural features. In view of this a number of international and multilateral organizations that were established over five decades ago have been re-examining their own viability in a changing world. The decision of the United States to go ahead with

establishing a broad based Nuclear Missile Defense (NMD) system has far-reaching implications for international cooperation: there is bound to be a spillover from defence strategy into other fields and new strategic sub-systems are bound to emerge. These are bound to create tension along existing fault lines in the community of nations.

The activities of many international and multilateral organizations are already being evaluated for effectiveness in this changing global environment. The results of such appraisals of the *raison d'être* of international cooperation will set the trend for future bilateral, regional and multilateral interaction in various fields. A number of new relationships, such as NATO's Partnership for Peace, have been formalized and a number of new organizations have been set up to supplement work that is already being done. The 55 member OSCE (Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe), which works on the basis of consensus, has been monitoring and reporting on the situation in areas such as Kosovo

and Chechnya (among others) to the United Nations and NATO. Its work has contributed to the success of a number of peace missions and the successful resolution of a number of crises in the region. Such activity is setting the trend for bilateral, regional and multilateral activity in a number of fields. It is also creating shifts in the relative importance of various organizations operating globally. As a result a sea change has taken place in peace making and peacekeeping across the globe: both are no longer the sole preserve of the United Nations and its organs.

Peacekeeping and peace making became the themes for the United Nations during the late 1980's and early 1990's. Operations expanded until the number of forces deployed under the UN flag increased from 10,000 to 70,000 at one point in time. The Somalia peacekeeping expedition, seen as an extension of US

foreign policy, seriously dented the credibility of United Nations. Now African nations have created a regional reserve force that can be deployed on the continent, with, or without a UN mandate.

There is no doubt now that UN peacekeeping forces were unable to deal with the situation in Bosnia/Herzegovina partly because of a strictly limited mandate from the UN Security Council. The nature of missions undertaken by forces under the UN flag had changed during the 1980's, but the fundamental changes in policy that were necessary to ensure the success of such missions had not been secured. The world body seemed unwilling to acknowledge that wars were being waged in Europe on the basis of ethnicity. As a result neither peace keeping, nor peace making, the major UN policy initiatives of the late 1980's and early 1990's, worked. Worldwide, ethnic conflicts increased in number, intensity and complexity. This paved the way for NATO intervention in Kosovo, on the basis of a mandate from a multilateral defence organization rather than the international community of nations—action instead of rhetoric.

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