

# Combating racism and intolerance

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**W**ith the collapse of apartheid in South Africa the world's last openly discriminatory state system disappeared. Many people thought it ushered in a new era in which the principle of equality before the law would be universally accepted and practiced. No more colonialism, no more slavery, no more white supremacy over black, male over female. If one compares the situation now with that of a century ago, mankind has indeed made progress. Colonialism, slavery, women being legally subservient to their husbands - all these are things of the past. But many barriers, taboos, and practices that treat people far from equally remain, even as we enter the twenty-first century.

Recall some recent, and not so recent, stories in the news. Women in parts of the NWFP denied the right to vote in local elections - not by the law, but by the men living in those areas. Two lovers in an Uttar Pradesh village hanged by their own families for daring to defy caste barrier and wanting to marry. Riots in Asian inner-city areas of England, sparked in part by alleged police discrimination against non-whites. Recall also the ethnic cleansing that became synonymous with war in the Balkans, and the genocide that was perpetrated in Rwanda.

These are blatant examples of intolerance and discrimination, but there are many subtler forms. Asian-origin doctors in the UK, for example, complain of the 'glass ceiling' they encounter when they go for top consultant posts. Blacks in the US are many times more likely to get the death penalty than whites. And in many societies sons are still more desired and better treated than daughters.

In short discrimination and intolerance still exist. Which is why in 1978 the UN General Assembly passed a resolution calling for a conference to tackle these issues. The World Conference Against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance will be held - appropriately - in Durban, South Africa from 31 August-7 September.

According to Mary Robinson, UN High Commissioner for



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raeli excesses in the Middle East, but on this issue it has been unwavering in its support. Senator Tom Lantos, a member of the US delegation at the Geneva agenda-setting talks, declared that if Zionism remained on the agenda, attendance at Durban 'would make the US a party to the lynching of Israel'. President Bush echoed these sentiments: 'We will have no representative there as long as they continue to pick on Israel.'

The US is also embroiled in the second controversial agenda item: slavery and the issue of reparations. African nations and some black American groups are calling for slavery to be acknowledged as a 'crime against humanity' and for appropriate reparations to be made. President Bush is reluctant to accept either, and especially the latter: like courts deciding that smoking causes death, if the principle of compensation for slavery is accepted it could lead to literally millions of claims. On this issue also the US is threatening to withdraw, much to the disgust of black leaders like Jesse Jackson.

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The third 'problem area' is caste. Described as Asia's 'hidden apartheid', Dalits and human rights organisations are pressing for caste discrimination to be discussed in Durban. The Indian government, however, is far from keen to discuss the issue. It argues that caste, being based on religion, should not be equated with racism. Furthermore, as with Kashmir, it claims discrimination based on caste is an internal matter.

Apologising for slavery could be regarded as historical nit-picking - its over, why drag it up again now? Because, while slavery is over, racism still exists in the US, especially in police dealings with blacks, Hispanics and other non-whites. If the US can't face up to the greater historical wrong, how will it address the lesser intolerance in its society and police force today? Zionism and caste, irrespective of the defence that they are political and religious matters respectively, are manifested in practice as one group(s) openly mistreating another (others). Since they generate discrimination, they belong on the Durban agenda.

According to Mary Robinson, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights and the Conference's Secretary-General, it 'has the potential to be among the most significant gatherings at the start of the century'.

However, there are indications even before the Conference has started that this potential could end up unfulfilled. In preparation for the Conference a number of regional gatherings were held (six in all) to discuss issues most relevant to those areas - discrimination in Europe could, for example, be very different to that in Africa. Two rounds of agenda-setting talks were also held. The aim of all these preliminary meetings was to come up with an agenda and draft resolution that could be discussed in the Conference proper.

In theory, a simple straightforward exercise; in practice anything but that. Objections have been raised to the inclusion of certain phenomena on the agenda. Together these threaten to scuttle the Conference, or at least reduce its impact to nonentity status. The biggest controversy is over the insertion of Zionism in the draft resolution. Arab states are pressing for this, Israel and the US strongly resisting.

Between 1975 and 1991 a UN resolution did consider Zionism to be a form of racism and racial discrimination. But, coincident with the start of the ill-fated Middle East peace process, that resolution was revoked in 1991. The Muslim world now wants to revive it. At the UN regional meeting in Tehran, Arab and Asian countries added 'Israel's racist policies' to the Palestinians, to the Conference agenda.

Tel Aviv argues that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is a political issue, and therefore has no place in the Conference. It has strongly attacked what it sees as its singling out. The Bush administration might have condemned some recent Is-

crimination, they belong on the Durban agenda.

**W**hy not go ahead without discussing these controversial issues? After all, as indicated in the beginning of this article, there is no shortage of forms of intolerance and discrimination in the world. Tackle those first, and worry about Zionism, caste and apologising for slavery later.

This approach could have been taken were it not for two factors. One, excluding Zionism and caste in particular, would in itself represent discrimination by the Conference against the Palestinians and Dalits. (Also, if a World Conference on Intolerance won't address their plight, who will? - The Israelis?) But two, it's the thin end of the wedge. Once you start taking things off the agenda because perpetrators of those forms of discrimination object, how can you deny the next country that asks for removal, and the next and so on? Of course, those who practice discrimination don't want to discuss it. The question is, should the UN listen to them, or should it listen to those who have to suffer its consequences? - The Palestinians and Dalits want Zionism and caste on the agenda.

US participation, and at what level (Secretary of State Colin Powell or a lesser delegation), is something George Bush will decide on in the next few days. Much will depend on whether Israel attends. The agenda for Durban - still not finalised - will be discussed in the initial days of the Conference. As for the outcome, considering how much resistance there has been to simply acknowledging that some practices are forms of discrimination and intolerance, deciding on concrete action to eradicate them looks unlikely.