

# The Durban durbar

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**I**n the run-up to the World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance that begins today in Durban the main activity on the part of many interested parties was to indulge in racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance. You may ask why the world needs yet another gabfest, costing squillions, at which a lot of self-important people ease themselves out of five star hotels and travel by chauffeured limousine to a podium where they pontificate in front of an audience whose members pay not the slightest attention but eagerly wait their turn to deliver equally unmemorable and useless orations.

"The spotlight of the world will be upon us," said one of these modest chaps, as he prepared to pack his bags to go first class to Durban for his five minutes of cataleptic conceit. But will it? And will this or any other international conference improve the lot of one single human being? (That is apart from participants enjoying generous allowances and those employed in hotels, international airlines, car hire companies, provision of 'personal services', and Scotch whisky production.)

The conference (called the WCAR, known as Wacker) involves (take a deep breath, now): "all UN member states; all regional organisations and commissions involved in the preparation of regional meetings [there were twelve of these: in Addis Ababa, Bangkok, Dakar, Geneva (4), Santiago (2), Strasbourg, Tehran and Warsaw]; representatives of organisations which have received a standing invitation from the General Assembly to participate as observers; UN specialised agencies, regional commissions, bodies and programmes; representatives of UN mechanisms in the field of human rights [God knows what this means]; and interested non-governmental organisations to be represented by observers in accordance with UN Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31." Last, as a catchall in case anyone's nose felt out of joint about not being asked, there will be the groupies from "Other interested governmental organisations to be represented as observers." And don't forget the pre-conference jamboree for 7,000 young people from all over the world who will spend a few energetic days in a Durban sports' stadium producing a "youth action plan". It makes you wonder if there is going to be anyone left at home to mind the shop.

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ers have many shots in their lockers. They dredge up items such as religious intolerance, globalisation, militarisation, privatisation and, of course, as being practically mandatory at any gathering of over six people these days, AIDS. The fact that intolerance of religion is practised by dozens of nations attending the Wacker is ignored. Do not expect criticism of important countries concerning their atrocious persecution of various religious groups, for such censure is directed only at those who can't hit back. This is humbug at its apogee.

The "themes" are couched in the usual gobbledegook of international newspeak, and one of the less illuminating is the requirement to identify "The sources, cause, forms and contemporary manifestations of racism racial intolerance and related intolerance" which one might think could be obtained by reading newspapers "Other subjects will include hate crimes, nomads,

Gypsies, or Roma ['Roma' is the plural of 'Rom', which means a male gypsy, which I'll bet wasn't what was intended], and victims of racism will be given a platform to recount what happened to them."

Being fascinated by all this (and, it must be said, a bit miffed at being one of the few people on the planet who has not been invited to the Durban Durbar), I looked up the "Declarations and Programmes of Action Adopted by The First (1978) and The Second (1983) World Conference to Combat Racism and Racial Discrimination." There was a lot more huffing and puffing than

practicalities in the 16,659 words of these papers (as there will be this week), and one can be forgiven for observing that there was turgid repetitiveness. But it was all well-intentioned stuff, even if it produced nothing of benefit to anyone.

The 1978 conference urged the world to "recognise the rights of indigenous peoples to [amongst other things] call themselves by their proper name and to express freely their ethnic, cultural and other characteristics." This might have been a reasonable adjuration, were it not for the fact that it was emphasis on freely expressing ethnic differences which led directly to the appalling ethnic slaughter in the Balkans and the Hutu/Tutsi genocide (to name only two revolting tragedies), both of which could have been avoided if there had been less talk around the world, and a lot more action.

But action is not what conferences

anyone left at home to mind the shop. Some of the "Key Topics" meant to be covered at this ludicrous binge included "gender discrimination, landlessness, migrants, slavery, Zionism, the caste system in Asia and the plight of indigenous people" but there are some problems about the wish-list. If Zionism is mentioned, for example, a lot of people will walk out and the US will be upset and will chastise any country bold enough to endorse an anti-Israeli motion - unless it is an oil-rich Gulf State which does so, in which case there will be some truly virtuosic moral tap-dancing by the State Department. How fortunate it is to have had so much practice in that art.

Then there is the agenda item of caste discrimination that was vetoed by India which says it is an internal matter being resolved by "domestic mechanisms of redress". The indigenous people of Japan, the Ainu - one of the world's most downtrodden and neglected native groups - are not going to be represented either, although they asked permission to say a word or two. The Ainu will not even be mentioned, because a country that dares do so will never receive a yen again. It is ironic that agreement was reached to keep caste off the agenda on the day after "Vishal, an upper caste Brahmin [and] his 18-year old girlfriend, Sanu, belonging to the Jat community [were] hanged to death in northern India by villagers opposed to their inter-caste relationship," following which there was no legal action. Mind you, nobody ever considered bringing up the sickening plight of thousands of village women in Balochistan or Sindh. No glamour, I suppose.

There are limits, it appears, to recognising and publicising the wretchedness of some of those who continue

a lot more action.

But action is not what conferences are about. Conferences are about 'urging', 'condemning' (selectively), 'identifying' (ditto), 'considering', 'reaffirming' and 'calling upon'. Above all, they are about constructing an agenda for the next conference, as if this one wasn't absurd enough. It is ridiculous for these people (most of them terribly well-meaning, poor ingenuous souls) to declare that there should be 'reparations and recompense' for African countries from which slaves were sent overseas in bygone years. The embarrassing problem with this little wheeze, as pointed out by the sensible African leader, President Wade of Senegal, is that Africans actually sold their own people to white slavers. They needed no encouragement in this vile crime; they welcomed the chance to make a few bucks, just as African leaders seem to welcome a similar opportunity in 2001. The wise observations of Mr Wade have attracted much contumely from his fellows, from black organisations in the US, and, inevitably, from the organisers of the 'Pan-African Conference on Reparations' held in Nigeria in 1993, the year in which that country made a law providing for capital punishment for criticising the government.

It is futile to be sensible and pragmatic where the serious business of international conferences is concerned. Controversial subjects cannot be raised, lest powerful nations become angry; unpalatable truths cannot be spoken, for such would call down the scorn of the conference as a whole; and vast expenditure on VIF air travel, limos, and top price hotels must be accepted without question because these things are deemed essential for the greater good by those who attend the conferences. T