

A summit against intolerance

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The terrorist attacks on the United States, which occurred only three days after the close of the 3rd World Conference Against Racism, Xenophobia, Racial Discrimination and Similar Forms of Intolerance (WCR) in Durban, South Africa, unequivocally revealed the currentness of the issues discussed at that conference. What is at stake is the possibility of another paradigm of civilisation that does not lend itself to simplistic and black-and-white reductions regarding right and wrong, and that values diversity, universal human rights and the preservation of life. These principles and premises are systematically emphasised in the WCR Declaration and Programme of Action.

On 11 September 2001, the world watched in horror the acts of terror perpetrated in New York and Washington. The perplexity and indignation caused by the brutal death of thousands of people focused international debate on terrorism and its causes. The United States' response—a pitiless war against Afghanistan—deepened the pain and suffering of civilians in that country. The consequences of those terrible events are still not fully clear. What is clear is the need to join forces with all those committed to peace and democracy to counteract the conservative and militarist wave that is being mobilised. Combating horror with more horror is not acceptable. Solidarity among peoples is essential at a time like this.

The terrorist attacks on the United States, which occurred only three days after the close of the 3rd World Conference Against Racism, Xenophobia, Racial Discrimination and Similar Forms of Intolerance (WCR) in Durban, South Africa, unequivocally revealed the currentness of the issues discussed at that conference. The Conference, which took place from August 31 to September 8, 2001, brought together over 2,500 representatives from 170 countries, including 16 heads of state, 58 ministers of foreign affairs and 44 other ministers. In addition to official representatives, some 4,000 NGOs from across the world and approximately 1,300 journalists were accredited to cover the sessions.

Because of difficulties encountered in arriving at a consensus on some of the main themes of the conference – especially those related to the Israel-Palestine question, to past slavery and identification of the victims of discrimination – the negotiations took one day more than scheduled. For those following the process in Durban it was clear from the outset that it was not just any conference. The name of the conference itself, chosen after lengthy discussions among governments, was an early indication of tensions that would arise over the course of the preparatory process and final negotiations. It was a world conference that would have to come to grips, at an unprecedented level, with the profound causes of hate, violence and social desegregation.

Of all the UN social conferences, the WCR most forcefully called upon “national” societies to face their own demons. At the centre of the debates were issues affecting the wellbeing and security of individuals and groups in their everyday lives, issues that cross traditional boundaries between North and South. Problems such as those of immigrants, the *Roma* (gypsies), the *Dalits* (India’s “untouchables”), African descendants, indigenous peoples and women go beyond national and geopolitical boundaries. The same can be said of the problems of those who suffer discrimination because of their sexual or religious preferences.

Aggravated by economic and political variables, intolerance and discrimination, which are deep-rooted in our cultures, are seen in day-to-day actions and reaffirmed by the media. Intolerance and discrimination manifest

exclusion in social relations that is transmitted from one generation to another. The way in which societies deal with these issues affects social hierarchy and access to the benefits of development.

Achieving international legitimacy for their struggles was, in certain cases, the main goal of social movements involved in the preparatory process for Durban and during the conference itself. In some cases, these groups met with tough opposition from governments, as happened with the *Dalits*, whose case against discrimination was excluded from the documents because of India’s veto. The problem of discrimination based on sexual preferences was also excluded from the final documents, with only Brazil actively defending inclusion in the final moments of negotiations.

In some cases, governments insisted on restricting debate to the sphere of mechanisms already established in international negotiations and processes. An example was the attempt by African countries to address reparations due to victims of slave trafficking, from the period of slavery and colonialism, only in the context of policies on economic aid to Africa. In the same way, an effort was made to avoid specifically addressing current manifestations of such practices in the conference.

The participation of social organisations and movements in the WCR guaranteed that the promise of compromise contained in the title was not lost on the way to Durban. With regard to issues concerning people of African descent, the mobilisation of social movements resulted in the incorporation of a set of extremely advanced proposals into the document approved at the regional preparatory meeting for the Americas, held in Santiago, Chile, in December 2000.

The mobilisation and coordination of Latin American and Caribbean people of African descent played a crucial role in this process. The establishment of the Afro-Latin-Caribbean Alliance may be considered one of the main political achievements of the WCR. The Alliance provides not only a political reference for pressuring governments, but also a forum for discussion with organisations of people of African descent from Europe and North America (USA and Canada), as well as African organisations.

The art of possible commitment

Despite the many obstacles, the agreements reached in South Africa represent a decisive step towards greater tolerance and peace. The polarisation of debate on the Middle East conflict made the construction of consensus difficult almost to the end and left deep scars on the Durban negotiations. The radicalisation of positions caused the United States and Israel to leave the negotiations at one of the tensest moments. Not even the NGO Parallel Forum escaped this tension. The text of the final document of the Forum on the Israel-Palestine question, although quite strong relative to Israeli policy, suffered reservations from bodies such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch.

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The agreement reached on the Israel-Palestine conflict sharpened United States' isolation. Israel was not criticised individually and both anti-Semitism and anti-Islamism were condemned. The right to self-determination of the Palestinian people was recognised, but Zionism was not rated as racism. The language of the commitment adopted disappointed those who had hoped for a stronger condemnation of Israeli violation of Palestinian rights in the occupied territories, but it enabled achievement of consensus on the text.

The Declaration and Programme of Action adopted at Durban did not openly address the causes of discrimination, racism and xenophobia, nor did it address issues of immigrants and indigenous peoples. Some groups protested the non-recognition of indigenous peoples' right to call themselves "nations." Among the most polemical issues were those relating to the classification of slave trade and slavery as crimes against humanity, and the whole debate on reparation due those who suffered its consequences.

Regarding condemnation of transatlantic slave trade and slavery, the Conference reached an intermediary formulation: it classified as crimes against humanity contemporary episodes, stating that it "should always have been so." The text adopted at the end of the Conference represents significant and historical progress:

"We acknowledge that slavery and the slave trade, including the transatlantic slave trade, were appalling tragedies in the history of humanity not only because of their abhorrent barbarism but also in terms of their magnitude, organised nature and especially their negation of the essence of the victims, and further acknowledge that slavery and the slave trade are a crime against humanity and should always have been so, especially the transatlantic slave trade and are among the major sources and manifestations of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance, and that Africans and people of African descent, Asians and people of Asian descent and indigenous peoples were victims of these acts and continue to be victims of their consequences."

In fact, from the standpoint of people of African descent, there were many positive points in the documents approved. Specific issues were broadly contemplated, although the central theme of reparation, one of the points giving rise to infinite controversy, was too generically formulated in the final document:

"...we invite the international community and its members to honour the memory of the victims of these tragedies. We further note that some have taken the initiative of regretting or expressing remorse or presenting apologies, and call on all those who have not yet contributed to restoring the dignity of the victims to find appropriate ways to do so..."

The WCR was less specific on concrete measures and new goals, leaving details of actions up to the countries themselves, who will be responsible for the preparation of National Plans of Action for the promotion of diversity, equality, social justice and equity. The guidelines and priorities of these actions were clearly indicated by the delegates, however, and these constitute a set of basic commitments to be taken on by governments and international institutions. Among the most important set out in the Durban documents are the following:

- Recognition of the importance of currently existing international instruments for the struggle against racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and similar forms of intolerance, in particular the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, establishing the year 2005 as a goal for its ratification;
- Reform of judicial institutions and national legislation, in order to struggle against racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and similar forms of intolerance, including the guarantee to punish those responsible for such practices;

- Improvement of national and international information and research systems, and the regular production of social indicators making it possible to measure progress or regression regarding the Conference objectives. The Conference also requested that the United Nations develop research, educational and communication programmes aimed at redeeming Africa's contribution to the history of humanity;
- Promotion of *assertive action* as the best way of fighting racial inequality, especially in the areas of education, labour market, health, housing, sanitation, drinking water and environmental monitoring;
- Incorporation of a gender dimension into programmes fighting racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related forms of intolerance;
- Prioritisation of the struggle against poverty in the fight against racism, through initiatives such as the New African Initiative and other innovative mechanisms such as the World Solidarity Fund for the Eradication of Poverty;
- The developed countries, United Nations and multilateral financial institutions must find the means to offer new financial resources to fund actions arising from the implementation of the Durban commitments;
- The Conference supported the proposal made by the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights to set up an Anti-Discrimination Unit to collaborate with member states and other UN agencies in the process of implementing the commitments, issuing annual reports on progress, gathering information and seeking the cooperation of civil society organisations.

The Durban conference revealed the difficulty around the world of addressing racism and all forms of intolerance. The impasse and near failure of the negotiations because it was impossible to reach agreement on the Middle East and on the so-called "subjects of the past" was only the most visible aspect of a climate of extreme sectoralism that prevailed practically to the last day.

The commitments taken on by governments in the Declaration and Programme of Action are still timid and limited in view of the enormity of the problems, but they are an indisputable advance, a step forward, towards solution of the problems being discussed.

Finally, given the agenda elaborated by the Third World Conference Against Racism, Xenophobia, Racial Discrimination and Similar Forms of Intolerance, we face crucial decisions in the construction of a world in which acts of absolute disregard for human life, so frequent in the history of humanity, are no longer possible. The results of Durban will be the compass, although they are fragile and contradictory, guiding us through the storms on the horizon.

What is at stake is the possibility of another paradigm of civilisation that does not lend itself to simplistic and black-and-white reductions regarding right and wrong, and that values diversity, universal human rights and the preservation of life. These principles and premises are systematically emphasised in the WCR Declaration and Programme of Action. Additionally, the role of civil society organisations in addressing the major challenges following 11 September should not be neglected.

As was the case in the WCR where civil society guaranteed that controversial voices were not silenced, it is the duty of civil society throughout the world, together with political and religious leaders, to react vigorously to the dehumanising nihilism of those who treat life as an insignificant detail. ■

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