

The Durban Review Conference: Hopefully more than words

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On Monday, the 20th of April, activities began early at the United Nations building in Switzerland where representatives of organizations accredited to the Durban Review Conference stood in long lines to register for the badges to access the UN Durban Review Conference. For a full week, state representatives from all around the world reviewed progress towards implementing the measures adopted at the 2001 UN World Conference Against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance (WCAR) in Durban.

Unfortunately the Conference took place with many fewer participants than initially expected. Joining Israel, Canada, the United States, Italy, and Australia in announcing boycotts one weekend before the start of the Conference were Germany, the Netherlands, Poland, and Sweden. These countries declared their decision with the fear that the conference may turn out to be a platform for anti-Semitic statements. The US administration has been widely criticized by US human rights and anti-racism organizations for boycotting such an important and unique conference, arguing that the US needs to engage in a dialogue, take a position and condemn such statements at the Conference and not just withdraw.

This Conference was very important for the victims all over the world, who need States to agree on some global guidelines, global strategies to implement best practices to combat racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerances. The major outcome of the Durban Review Conference is the Declaration, which is by various civil society groups viewed as an important achievement. At the same time they regret that major countries, such as the US and Germany, have not adopted it. However, this document shall be seen as a new starting point for lobbying with the US Government requiring the administration to first adopt it and then start implementing it at national and local levels.

The Declaration omits references to "defamation of religion", and it does not single out Israel or the question of the Middle East conflict. Also, the problematic language around "negative stereotypes of religion" has been amended. It's not quite far enough, but it addresses some important issues, for instance with regard to migrant rights and the identification of Roma Gypsies as one of the most vulnerable groups having been subjected to a very specific situation of concern. Indeed, it can be said that the document is a basis and a call for States, intergovernmental organizations, NGOs and civil society to finally take action and to protect victims of racism, intolerance and discrimination at the international, national and sub-national levels.