

Gearing up for another Durban

After years of debate, the UN General Assembly recently allocated a budget for a follow-up to the 2001 World Conference Against Racism held in Durban, South Africa.

Canadian NGOs, including the National Anti-Racism Council, which encompasses various ethnocultural communities, women's organizations and labour unions, have long supported a new conference.

On the other hand, the government of Canada has resisted lending support to the Durban II initiative, scheduled for 2009. It is one of seven countries that voted against it in the General Assembly.

Which side has it right?

Canada is domestically committed to anti-racism and is dedicated to working through international organizations to further that objective globally. It is in our national interest to see world bodies work toward eradicating discrimination and hatred. It is, therefore, incumbent on us to figure out whether Durban II will advance these goals or set them back.

Let's recall that the first Durban Conference was a disaster. The problem was not just that it focused excessively on the Israeli-Arab conflict, which is a geopolitical issue more at home in the Security Council than at an anti-racism conference. The trouble was that the conference so severely demonized Israelis and Jews that it turned into a pro-racism rather than an anti-racism forum. Delegates returned with souvenir copies of *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* and other anti-Semitic books as well as Nazi-like cartoons.

Will Durban II be more of the same?

The year before the first Durban conference, it was not difficult to predict trouble. While Jewish organizations were getting ready to present their case, a key preparatory meeting was held in one of the most Judeo-phobic settings possible, Tehran. The Islamic Republic of Iran announced that visas would not be issued to Zionist organizations, code for the elimination of any credible Jewish participation. B'nai B'rith International and other mainstream organizations were barred, leading to an agenda that perversely asserted that Zionism is racism while anti-Semitism is not.

Indeed, anti-Semitism, the traditional label for racism against Jews everywhere, was transformed into a term used by Israel's enemies to proclaim their own

victimization. After the Durban Conference, there wasn't even a proper word left for the hatred of Jews, let alone the thought that it is a problem to be addressed.

The upcoming conference seems to be building up to more of the same. The preparatory meetings have better venues – Geneva instead of Tehran – but the timing is a tad suspicious. The next two meetings are scheduled for Passover and Yom Kippur. The Board of Deputies of British Jews has asked for better dates. So far it has been ignored.

That's not surprising. The Durban II chair is Muammar Gaddafi's Libya, a country that expelled its Jewish community soon after the 1967 war between Israel and Egypt, Jordan and Syria. A government that takes foreign policy out on a domestic minority does not bode well as chair for an anti-racism conference. Imagine if Canada were to deal with the People's Republic of China by turning its sights on Canadians of Chinese heritage. Could we then qualify as host for a conference on the very anti-racism we abused?

The truth about Durban I is that all human rights groups, including Canadian NGOs that supported it, were the losers. If Durban II is going to again bury all other racism issues under the debris of the Middle East conflict, then it's better to bury Durban itself.

Anna Morgan is a Toronto writer whose column appears every four weeks.

Source: By Anna Morgan, The Toronto Star, Jan 20, 2008 04:30 AM

Ahmed Hussen
Director of Communications
Canadian International Peace Project
1027 Finch Avenue West
P.O. Box 30088
Toronto, Ontario
M3J 3L6
Canada
E-mail: cipp@canadianipp.org
Website: www.canadianipp.org

The Canadian International Peace Project (CIPP) is a novel and unique non-partisan organisation that has brought together diverse groups and individuals to work on issues and projects relating to local, national and international peace, security and development . Through partnership on events and projects, the CIPP fosters mutual respect and sustainable relationships among diverse groups including those in conflict with each other.

This article is for informational purposes only.