

Analysis: Will 'Civil Society Forum' repeat 2001's anti-Semitism?

April 13, 2009

Gerald Steinberg , THE JERUSALEM POST

In the 2001 UN-sponsored Durban conference, the main assault against Israel and the West took place in the NGO Forum. The combination of physical violence against Jewish delegates, distribution of crude anti-Semitic propaganda, and the attacks against Israel led then UN Human Right Commissioner Mary Robinson to denounce and disregard the NGO declaration.

Funders, including the Ford Foundation and the Canadian government, were embarrassed by their role, and withdrew support for similar events.

In the planning for the 2009 Durban Review Conference, scheduled to open in Geneva on April 20, UN officials, including current High Commissioner Navi Pillay, declared that they would not support a similar NGO Forum. However, the recent emergence of a "civil society forum", endorsed by Rev. Liberato Bautista, the president of CONGO - the Conference of NGOs - may presage the repeat of anti-Semitic and anti-Western attacks, based on the 2001 precedent.

This event is scheduled to take place in Geneva from April 17-19, before Durban II opens there on April 20. It is to include what is advertised as a "large public demonstration with activists" on the afternoon of April 18. The main force behind this revival appears to be North South 21, a group closely linked to the Libyan regime and represented in Geneva by Curtis Doebbler.

According to UN Watch, North South 21 manages the "Human Rights Prize" - with past recipients including French Holocaust denier Roger Garaudy, Fidel Castro, and Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez. The official announcement for the Civil Society Forum event appeared two weeks ago on a Web site registered under the name of Jan Lonn, the Swedish-based head of the World Against Racism Network who is active in many radical NGO activities.

The UN funded Lonn to go to the African meeting in Nigeria, apparently in response to requests from unidentified African states. Since both North South 21 and Lonn are fringe actors, whose campaigns for an NGO Forum were opposed by many mainstream NGOs, these efforts were of little importance until they were endorsed by CONGO's Bautista.

Although the members of CONGO's anti-racism committee explicitly rejected calls for participation, the preparatory meetings for these events are held in the CONGO offices in Geneva. CONGO briefings have given extensive visibility to the Civil Society Forum, falsely portraying it as a serious human rights event. This participation provides significant additional visibility and the façade of legitimacy.

On this basis, Adrien Zoller, who heads Geneva For Human Rights, and who formerly headed the International Service for Human Rights, announced that his group is "at the disposal of the organizers of the Civil Society Forum." This further added to the visibility.

Among the Palestinian NGOs scheduled to participate are Badil and the Ittijah coalition. Badil's funders include Trocaire (an Irish Catholic "aid organization" funded by the government), the Swiss Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Norwegian Peoples Aid, Oxfam, DanChurchAid (DCA), the Mennonite Central Committee (MCC), and the NGO Development Center (with funding from Switzerland, Sweden, Denmark and Holland).

Both Badil and Ittijah are leading supporters of the Durban Strategy, promoting the anti-Israel BDS (boycotts, divestment, and sanctions) campaign, and accusing Israel of "apartheid, colonization, occupation, institutionalized racism, ethnic cleansing, etc."

While the degree to which this Civil Society Forum will emulate the 2001 NGO Forum is uncertain, the involvement of many of the same organizations and plans for similar events provide the basis for concern.

Prof. Gerald Steinberg is chair of the Political Science department at Bar Ilan University and Executive Director, NGO Monitor