

Inside Story: Bureaucracy and hypocrisy in Geneva

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The deadly mix of bureaucracy and hypocrisy in the United Nations and many of the powerful nongovernment organizations - was on full display before the opening of the Durban Review Conference.

The final meeting of the preparatory committee responsible for writing a draft declaration, which had already been postponed for two days due to a lack of consensus, was called for 3 p.m. on Friday in the UN building in Geneva. Once again, the room filled with diplomats, journalists and dozens of NGO officials. An agreement, officials hoped, would prevent more countries from deciding against participation, and might bring the United States, Canada, Italy and even Israel back to the table.

But 3 p.m. came and went - and the session finally began around 5, and still without an agreement. Frantic negotiations in closed rooms were continuing on the reference to Israel that Iran, Libya and the rest of the Islamic bloc demanded; whether to endorse the 2001 document that singled out Israel, leading the US and Israel to walk out; and on the issue of "Islamophobia."

In the interim, the session moved to short statements from NGO officials which have semi-official status in this international body composed of governmental representatives. Many of the speakers attacked Canada, the first country to pull out of the Durban Review Conference in protest, as well as the US and Italy. Israel, surprisingly, was barely mentioned.

When UN Watch was given the floor, a Palestinian doctor began to speak directly to the Libyan chairwoman - Najjat al-Hajjaji - that has run the meetings for almost two years. The noisy room became quiet - Dr. Ashraf Ahmed El-Hojouj began to tell the story of how he and five Bulgarian nurses were arrested as scapegoats for the deaths of children in a Bengazi hospital, and then tortured.

Ms. Hajjaji banged down her gavel to silence this human rights defender, but he continued - three times - as the Libyans lost their composure. Having become accustomed to the role of accusing Israel, they were unprepared for this exposure. When Dr. El-Hojouj left the hall, the press and many other participants followed him - this became the main news story.

A short while later, Anne Bayefsky from EyeontheUN.org began to speak. "The eyes of millions of victims of racism, xenophobia and intolerance are upon YOU, the representatives of states and the United Nations. And instead of hope you have given them despair. Instead of combating anti-Semitism you have handed them a reason for Jews to fear UN-driven hate mongering on a global scale."

The Libyan chair apparently had tuned out and did not bring her gavel down - and the delegates as well as NGO officials in the room heard Bayefsky's powerful condemnation of their hypocrisy. It was a sobering admonition.

For those of us who are accustomed to UN and human rights rhetoric sessions being used for Israel-bashing, both NGO statements reinforced the signs that the declaration of war against Israel and the Jewish people in Durban eight years ago would not be repeated in Geneva.

In addition, many of the virulent NGOs that led the Durban conference in 2001 were absent - the process of "naming and shaming" succeeded in preventing superpowers like Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International from sending officials. Similarly, the main funders of the Durban NGO Forum - the Ford Foundation and the Canadian government aid agency - were very careful this time.

As a result, the unofficial "civil society forum," with a radical agenda and led by NGOs such as the Libyan-linked North-South XXI, drew very few participants and no serious press coverage, and the same is true for the "Israel Review Conference." Their march through Geneva was also weak, and the Zionism = Racism placards were placed at the end of the line, where they received little visibility.

At 6:30 on Friday evening, the "final" draft text for Monday's meeting was finally released, but the paragraph adopting the 2001 declaration remained, and some other parts were still bracketed for further negotiation. The United States then repeated its decision to stay away, and later, Australia and the Netherlands announced that they would also not be attending. Other democracies may drop out as well.

In contrast, Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad decided that he would come to the opening session on Monday - the perfect example of how the UN system gives the worst violators of human rights the opportunity to pretend that they are qualified to judge the morality of others. Ahmadinejad's appearance coincides with the march planned by the Geneva Jewish community to mark Holocaust Memorial Day - a very fitting response.

Perhaps, when this is over, the main lesson will be to recognize that universal human rights are incompatible with the singling out Israel, or any other political target. The emphasis in Geneva on the persecution of minorities in Iran, the victims of genocide in Rwanda, and the other real human rights violations may show the way in restoring these moral principles, both in the United Nations and among the NGO community.

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