

Analysis: Ahmadinejad buries the Durban process

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Gerald Steinberg , THE JERUSALEM POST

The corridor discussions in the United Nations building before Iranian President Ahmadinejad's arrival focused on two questions: Would he tone down his usual Holocaust denial and threats against Israel in order to appear reasonable? And if not, would diplomats from countries like Britain, France and Norway - those that decided to participate in contrast to Canada, the US, Italy and Germany - fulfill their pledge to walkout if the "red lines" of Holocaust denial and racism were crossed.

We did not have long to wait - the speech was as bad as or worse than the usual Iranian diatribes, and the European diplomats left, being embraced and cheered by Jewish students, NGO leaders and human rights mentors Elie Wiesel and Alan Dershowitz.

These momentous events took place on the eve of Holocaust Remembrance Day. Citing the theme "never again," participants agreed that this should also mark the end of the Durban process that began at the infamous UN anti-racism conference in that city in 2001. Instead of focusing on real examples of discrimination and mass murder, that event had been hijacked to attack Israel using terms such as apartheid, war crimes and racism. In the official NGO forum, participants that included Human Rights Watch and Amnesty adopted a boycott strategy.

Israel and Jews around the world recognized that this demonization and delegitimation was as dangerous as the physical war and terror campaigns, and in some ways more sinister. For the past eight years, a strategy was developed to combat and defeat the threat. In Geneva, this approach proved successful.

Ahmadinejad's appearance was not a scenario in this strategy - his visit had been announced just one week before the opening session, by which time most of the counterattack mechanism was already in place. The first stage was to prevent another poisonous NGO Forum by "naming and shaming" the funders of the 2001 version, including the Ford Foundation and the Canadian government. UN officials agreed not to grant official sponsorship despite demands from vitriolic

NGOs such as Badil (the Palestinian "right of return" lobby funded by European governments) and the Libyan-linked North-South 21 organization. These events were still held, but with very limited participation or impact.

In parallel, during the long negotiations over the draft text for the government conference, Jewish community leaders and Israelis repeatedly held intensive meetings with Western democratic delegations to highlight the destructive impact of singling out Israel for condemnation in the Durban process. Canada, which had been a major supporter of Durban 2001, was the first to recognize the damage, and the US, Italy and others followed.

Thus, when the first session began, the point had been made and the chairs of many delegations were empty, even before Ahmadinejad's arrival. In addition, the language of the draft declaration that required months of detailed negotiations was largely toned down. The main problem, as President Obama eloquently stated on the evening before the grand opening, was that the entire process had been built on the failed foundations of the 2001 Durban catastrophe. In that case, what had been advertised as an anti-racism conference became a source of racism directed at Israel. To restore the moral foundation of universal human rights, an entirely new structure would be necessary.

In this sense, the Iranian president's latest hate speech confirmed to all that the Durban process must be totally repudiated before a new foundation for human rights can emerge. This conference has only begun - it is due to continue through Thursday - but Ahmadinejad has already demonstrated that there is no sense in holding any more diplomatic negotiations to find language that involves singling out Israel in any way. Instead, the focus should shift to developing an entirely new approach that prevents further abuses of moral principles by regimes or NGOs that exploit human rights. The sooner the Durban process is dead and buried, the faster a replacement will be developed.

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