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Analysis: A theater of the absurd

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Two large tents have been set up inside the United Nations compound in Geneva to handle the large crowds expected to line up for passes for the Durban Review Conference, opening on Monday. In addition to diplomats, there will be hundreds of officials from non-governmental organizations that claim to promote human rights, and a large media presence - certainly much larger than most events here usually warrant.

Apart from the tents, very little else at the event - which is taking place in the grand buildings constructed for the failed League of Nations between the two world wars - is ready.

The original UN World Conference Against Racism, held in Durban, South Africa in 2001, was prepared in Teheran under the radar of the governments of the United States and Israel, and when it suddenly turned into a virulent propaganda event, there was little that could be done.

The declaration of the government session was toned down, but still singled out Israel and all but ignored the real issues of racial discrimination around the world. In parallel, the NGO Forum did the heavy lifting of demonizing Israel, using terms like "apartheid" and "war crimes," and adopting a strategy of boycotts and isolation.

In contrast, for this Review Conference, every move has been examined under the spotlight of public debate, and the efforts led by Iran and Libya to repeat and expand on their successes in 2001 were quickly exposed. Instead of waiting for the last minute, first Canada, and then Israel, the United States and Italy announced that they would not participate in a similar betrayal of the moral foundations of human rights. Other European officials have made similar-sounding statements, while waiting to see if the text and surrounding events could be made palatable.

This threw the entire planning process into a state of chaos: With three days to go before the opening, the UN still does not know who is attending and who will be staying away. The vague statements and rumors change hourly - sometimes it is Germany that is reportedly out, other times Holland, Britain or the Czech Republic, or perhaps all 27 members of the European Union (this one seems unlikely).

And, in part as a result, there is no agreed draft text to be discussed, or perhaps more correctly, there are several versions. It seems that every day, a UN official announces that the final - really final this time - consensus text is about to be unveiled, resolving all of the disputes, and reestablishing the legitimacy of this event.

On Wednesday, UN Human Rights Commissioner Navi Pillay made a plea for help in preventing the disintegration of this conference, arguing that "lives are at stake. The future and hope of countless victims of racism lie in your hands."

Indeed, there are real victims of discrimination, even in the heart of Europe, but the anti-Israel obsession, to which even "respected" NGOs like Amnesty and Human Rights Watch contribute, has all but erased these moral issues. Pillay's plea also came far too late. She, like her predecessor Mary Robinson in 2001, was guilty of silence as the racists - led by Libya and Iran - were allowed to dominate the anti-racism agenda.

And then, to top off the absurdity, Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad announced that he would be attending. Ahmadinejad is the personification of everything the anti-racism conference was designed to address - he is a Holocaust denier who has called for genocide against Israel. Under his regime, Iran has become one of the major violators of human rights, oppressing women, minorities, religious groups like the Bahais and the small Jewish community, which live in constant fear of sudden arrests for "espionage."

When the news of the Iranian leader's decision reached the UN officials in Geneva, you could see and hear the combination of laughter and embarrassment. They recognized that there was no greater symbol of the hypocrisy represented by the Durban process - not even the radical NGOs which are planning to carry placards declaring "Zionism is racism" and similar slogans through the streets of Geneva, in a pale imitation of their moment of glory in Durban.

What is left of the Durban Review Conference is a circus, symbolized by the white tents. Whatever happens now is unlikely to change the overall conclusion that the Durban process which began in 2001 - based on demonizing Israel through the abuse of moral-sounding rhetoric - has now been exposed, ridiculed and perhaps defeated. If this is indeed the result, it will be a long time before the United Nations agrees to another such circus.

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