

No anti-Semitism at Durban II

Canada should end its boycott of Durban II

By [Diana Ralph](#)

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In October, I attended the U.N. Second Substantive Session of the Preparatory Committee for the Durban Review Conference, a Preparatory Committee for the Review of the UN World Conference Against Racism (WCAR), popularly called “Durban II”, scheduled for April 2009 in Geneva. As a Jew, I went to assess the validity of the Canadian government’s charges that Durban II is anti-Semitic. I found it was not. Instead, I witnessed delegates of the world’s nations hammering out an inspiring call to end racism worldwide and implement the Durban agreements.

The 2001 WCAR in Durban, South Africa, was a ground-breaking event which brought together over 150 countries (including Canada) and thousands of NGOs, to end racism “in all its forms.” For the world’s victims of racism, it raised unprecedented hope that the world’s governments would finally commit to end their oppression. The only states which walked out, to their shame, were Israel and the United States.

The Durban Declaration and Programme of Action (DDPA) focused on concerns of African descendents, Aboriginal people, the Dalit (“untouchables”), Roma, migrants, refugees, asylum seekers, and many more. Condemning slavery and human trafficking, it called for reparations. It demanded action on the underlying causes of racism: poverty, war, and global inequality. Among these many issues, it also condemned discrimination against Palestinian people living under Israeli occupation. At the 2001 NGO Forum, a few participants distributed offensive anti-Semitic material, but overwhelmingly other NGOs rejected their message. There is certainly nothing anti-Semitic in the DDPA. Out of its 180 pages, only 250 words address concerns of Israel or Palestine, all of which scrupulously respect Jews and Israel.

In the aftermath of Durban 2001, well-funded Israel Lobby groups have mobilized to discredit and derail the upcoming Durban Review Conference. They include the Simon Wiesenthal Centre, UN Watch, ICARE-Magenta Foundation, the American Jewish Committee and the World Jewish Diplomatic Corps of the World Jewish Congress. They characterize WCAR as an “anti-Semitic hate fest” and label any attention to the valid concerns of Palestinians as “anti-Semitic”. They defend Israeli discriminatory practices, and condemn the “use of human rights language to discredit a state” (i.e. Israel). They argue for “freedom of expression,” that is, the “freedom” of media to attack Muslims and Islam. They object to the term “Islamophobia,” because, they say, religions aren’t protected, as though targeting Muslims for being Muslims is less offensive than attacking Jews for being Jewish. And they support anti-Arab racial profiling in the name of fighting “terrorism.”

Israel Lobby groups attended the African and Latin American preparatory meetings to

counter provisions related to Palestinians, rights of refugees, racial profiling, and Islamophobia. The World Jewish Congress and its national affiliates have lobbied Western countries to boycott Durban II.

On February 5, Israel Lobby groups held an unpublicized meeting in Amsterdam with José Dougan-Beaca, head of the U.N. Anti-Discrimination Unit, which is the secretariat for the Durban Review Conference. Dougan-Beaca largely became a partisan advocate for their strategies in the organizing of the Review Conference to the detriment of pro-Durban NGOs.

Israel Lobby groups deluged foundations and the UN which had funded Durban 2001 NGO participants with threats to denounce them as anti-Semitic and jeopardize their charitable status if they funded NGOs to go to the Durban Review Conference and its preparatory process. As a result, funding for NGOs has almost evaporated. The Secretariat for the Durban Review Conference didn't even inform many NGOs about the Preparatory Committee meetings or the regional Review process. Some E.U. delegates boasted to me that they had managed to get the Review conference moved from South Africa to Geneva in order to reduce the number of NGOs participating. As a result, only about 35 NGOs (including many Israel Lobby groups) observed the Second substantive session of the Preparatory Committee for the 2009 Durban Review Conference (6 to 17 October 2008). At the Preparatory Conference, I saw over 20 pro-Israel groups lobbying. The Eye on the UN website posted denunciations of mild diplomatic concerns about Palestinians and racial profiling, accusing them of demonizing Israel and limiting freedom of expression.

Last January 23, Canada announced it would boycott the Durban Review Conference, and since then, Israel and the U.S. have also withdrawn. This boycott damages our country's reputation and betrays the world's (including Canada's) victims of racism. Only the Bloc stood firm against the Israel Lobby's lies and threats. I found no substance to allegations of anti-Semitism at WCAR. Independent Jewish Voices urges the Conservatives, Liberals, and NDP to rejoin the Durban Review Conference and stand up against racism.

Dr. Ralph is a Coordinator of Independent Jewish Voices (Canada) and an Associate Professor of Social Work at Carleton University.

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