

The United Nations Conference Against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance (WCAR)

Durban, South Africa, 08/28-09/8 2001

Canadian Jewish Congress Final Report

Introduction

The UN World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance (WCAR) took place in Durban, South Africa, from August 28 to September 8 of this year. It was two conferences in one. A forum of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and a meeting of world governments respectively held in the last week of August and the first week of September.¹

The WCAR was meant to develop policies for fighting the evils that make up its name. Each of the two conclaves had to produce a final document made up of a declaration and a programme of action. South Africa had been deliberately and rightly chosen as the venue for the Conference, since it is here that Apartheid - one of the worst instances of racism in the 20th century - was vanquished.

For the enemies of Israel and Zionism, however, apartheid provided the perfect marketing metaphor to appropriate in the fight against the Jewish State. Israel, in a word, was termed the Apartheid State in the 21st century, which like apartheid South Africa previously, had to be dismantled.

The Palestinians and their supporters cynically derailed the WCAR, turning into an anti-Israel, anti-Zionist exercise. The Palestinian/Arab/Muslim propaganda effort was exceptionally well funded and well organised. A Pro-Palestine/anti-Israel position became the Conference's central motif, even though the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is a political and not a racist one, and did not belong on the Conference agenda in the first place.

Jewish advocacy organizations from around the world, to counteract this effort, even in advance of Durban, organized themselves into an International Jewish Caucus. Canadian Jewish Congress, in the persons of Keith Landy (KL), National President and Manuel Prutschi (MP), National Director of Community Relations, was an integral part of it and was present in Durban throughout.

The NGO Forum

It brought over 2,000 NGOs. About 250 of these were Canadian, as many as 60 government-sponsored. The total number of delegates amounted to at least 6,000.

¹ NGOs are drawn from civil as opposed to political society, and represent specific group interests to government.

Decision-making powers, however, rested solely with over 40 caucuses (the Jewish Caucus was one) into which many but by no means all individual delegates and NGOs were organized. These caucuses were of various stripes, i.e. regional, religious, racial, ethnic, thematic, and so on.

Prejudiced arbitrariness characterized the entire NGO Forum process, as a result of the Forum's hijacking by the pro-Palestinian faction and its accomplice, the South African NGO organizing committee (SANGOCO). Hijacking, it should be noted, conveys forcefully wresting away rather than voluntary co-operation.

Every workshop, commission, plenum, irrespective of their purported themes featured the Palestinian issue and the attack on Israel. The Chair of the Forum (i.e. the head of SANGOCO) appeared at the opening wearing a kafieh, and people everywhere could be seen sporting it. Inflammatory anti-Israel banners, posters, flyers, T-shirts and materials were permitted unhindered on the conference grounds.

Classical antisemitism made its ugly presence felt. There were cartoons in the style of *Der Sturmer*, the Nazi newspaper. KL discovered and was able to purchase a copy of *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*² at the exhibition booth of a radical Islamic NGO.

Activities organized by the Jewish Caucus, such as a student-manned information table, an antisemitism commission, and a press conference, were invaded and disrupted by pro-Palestinian elements. Jews who attempted to attend and participate and speak out at several of the Forum's programmes were hindered, shouted down, or forced to leave.

Jewish lobbying efforts lacked the resources, planning and numerical impact of the pro-Palestinian campaign. Nonetheless, the Jewish Caucus, in what may be unparalleled unity of the world's leading Jewish advocacy organizations,³ with the phenomenal support and hospitality of Durban's Jewish community and using the Jewish Club as its headquarters, marshaled its resources on the ground very well. What the caucus lacked in quantity was more than made up in quality.

The exceptionally hard work of the Jewish Caucus, yielded positive results. The student delegations, both local and international, were particularly outstanding. They displayed dignity and courage throughout in advocating Israel's case. The caucus was able to turn the virulent anti-Zionism and antisemitism against the pro-Palestinian forces. Soon the pro-Palestine/anti-Israel motif had to compete with the motif of a racist anti-racism conference. This motif was encapsulated in a T-shirt that sported a peace symbol inside a *Magen David* on one side, and displayed on the back the imperative, "Fight Racism not

² The infamous Czarist antisemitic forgery that made its appearance in the early 1900s and which the historian Norman Cohn characterized as a "warrant for genocide."

³ The World Jewish Congress (whose delegation included the South African Jewish Board of Deputies and the CJC), Simon Wiesenthal Center, Anti Defamation League, B'nai Brith, Hadassah, International Council of Jewish Women, World Union of Jewish Students, and others,

Jews" followed by a quotation from Martin Luther King that anti-Zionism is antisemitism.

The "racist anti-racist conference" motif caught the attention of the conference and the world's media, and of the Canadian Government delegation. It also came to the attention of Mary Robinson, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, who in fact was the WCAR's overall head. She dramatically acknowledged the well-documented complaints submitted by the Jewish Caucus regarding the antisemitic atmosphere when, at a conference meeting, she declared "I am a Jew."⁴

The plenum of the NGO Forum convened one last time on the night of Saturday, September 1, to determine the final version of its declaration and programme of action. Since the plenum, despite the entreaties of the Jewish Caucus to the organizers, was scheduled for Shabbat day, the head of the German NGOs (who had been supportive of the Jewish position throughout) undertook to represent the caucus. The plenum, in the end was postponed nevertheless to Saturday night, not out of considerations for the Jews but because Spanish translators were unavailable earlier.

The Forum document, it was indicated, was to reflect all of racism's victims, expressing themselves in their own unfiltered voices This gave the Palestinians and their supporters carte blanche for their virulent attack on Israel. The Jewish Caucus, articulating the Jewish people's victimization, in its submission included a paragraph proclaiming anti-Zionism to be one of the most insidious contemporary manifestations of antisemitism, and detailing its negative repercussions on Jewish communities throughout the world.

A member of the World Council of Churches, representing the Ecumenical Caucus, challenged the "anti-Zionism=antisemitism" clause, and without a vote being taken, the chair of the plenum declared it removed. The Jewish community, in other words, was the only community whose voice was interfered with. This high-handed decision reflected the corruption of the entire NGO Forum process. The members of the Jewish Caucus (with MP representing CJC) walked out en masse with the cry of "Shame! Shame!" - and some other choice expressions - on their lips.⁵

The document was released on September 5, three days after it was due, and only 15 copies were publicly available. Obtaining a copy became as difficult and secretive, one imagines, as trying to obtain an illicit substance ... and, in a bizarre way, this was only fitting, since both are equally poisonous.

⁴ Some Islamic radicals, it was reported, took this declaration literally, and then criticized her. Obviously, in their eyes, she was just another cog in the world Jewish conspiracy.

⁵ MP underwent two contradictory experiences on the way out. In one, a delegate (African or of African descent) with a look of self satisfaction and contempt, wrapped her hand tightly around a stand up microphone to prevent him from speaking as he passed by. In the other, he was approached by a Roma delegate, who expressed his sadness at the Jewish Caucus being forced to walk out, and pleaded for MP to go back in so as to fight antisemitism and anti-Tziganism (gypsy hatred) together.

The Palestinians are one of the groups assigned pride of place in the document but the voices of racism's victims were not muffled. The document in fact extensively, if not comprehensively, details the myriad of victimizations taking place around the globe: aboriginal peoples, African and Asians and their descendants, gays and lesbians, the disabled, migrant workers, Roma, the Dalits of India, the Kurds, Tamils, Tibetans, the peoples of the Balkans, Chechnyans, Kashmiris, West Sumatrans, West Papuans, etc., etc.

The document states it as important to combat antisemitism and to teach it as a subject "in anti-racist education." It urges the promotion of "Holocaust remembrance, notably through education and the organization of cultural or media events, including the promotion of national days of Holocaust remembrance." There are also general sections on hate crimes as well as religious intolerance.

Pointedly omitted, however, are the references to anti-Zionism as antisemitism, and the consequences of anti-Zionism on Israel and on Jews. As well, "anti-Arabism" and "Islamophobia" are said also to be forms of "anti-Semitism" (sic). Such a false and ludicrous linkage is intended to dilute antisemitism as singularly applicable to Jewish victimization, thereby misrepresenting the Jewish historical experience and weakening its use as an argument to shield the Jewish people and Israel from persecution and attack.⁶

American, Asian African, Arab and Muslim states are mentioned along with Israel in the context of discussing various victimized peoples. It is only in the case of Israel, however, that the document goes well beyond mere mention.

The focus on Palestinian victimization and on Israel as the victimizer state is heavy, unrelenting and relatively extensive. It includes ¶s 98 and 99, 160-165 and 417-425. Israel is painted as satanic and genocidal. It is characterized as the archetypal apartheid, racist state of the 21st century. It is portrayed as the epitome of inhumanity and the Evil Empire, which the world must dismantle and destroy. This language is no less than an ABOMINATION.

20th century racist antisemitism declared that Jews couldn't live among the rest of humanity. 21st century racist antisemitism declares that the world's only Jewish State has no place in the community of nations. It is not hyperbole to contend that the anti-Israel sections of the NGO Forum Declaration and Programme of Action are the 21st century's equivalent of *Mein Kampf*.

The NGO Forum document opens with the grandiloquent claim to speak on behalf of "non-governmental organisations and other civil society groups from around the world." But, to what degree is the document truly representative of global civil society?

The deciding plenum began in the presence of about 500 delegates (a fraction of the total). Some time after the walk out by the Jewish Caucus, the European Caucus followed

⁶ See Manuel Prutschi's "Antisemitism, Islamophobia and Anti-Arabism: The False Link."

suit. When the plenum finished in the early hours of Sunday morning there were only about 70 delegates left. Furthermore it remained unclear as to whether a vote had even been taken regarding the final document

There undoubtedly were all too many NGOs (one, after all was one too many) that supported such language. There were many others that as long as their issues had been dealt with were indifferent to the virulent antisemitism. There were indications, nonetheless, of a different point of view.⁷

Canadian Jewish representatives at the WCAR, in their discussions with their co-citizen delegates, explained that Israel, Zionism⁸, the Jewish people and Judaism are inextricably intertwined as part of a single body. An attack on one is an attack on the other. Antisemitism, it was made very clear, includes anti-Zionism as one of its most insidious contemporary manifestation.⁹

Some Canadian delegates, though one senses it was not many, supported or were co-opted to go along with the anti-Israel propaganda.¹⁰ There were Canadian delegates who, within the ambit of a meeting of Canadian NGOs and in interaction with their Jewish colleagues, did speak out against the antisemitism.

⁷ MP, while waiting in line to register, became friends with a delegate from the Resettlement and Development Network, a South African NGO. He warmly praised South African Jewish community organizations for their aid and relief work among the poor and the destitute.

KL and MP, at the antisemitism commission, met Pallo Jordan, the most prominent theoretician of the African National Congress and a former cabinet minister. He vigorously argued with the pro-Palestinian elements that invaded the commission and castigated them for their disruptive efforts.

KL and MP met a scholar representing a South African NGO whose research included Arab colonialism and participation in the slave trade in Africa.

A leader (African, Muslim, and Socialist) of South Africa's Teachers' Federation approached KL and MP to express concern about the antisemitic atmosphere and his desire to work towards an accommodation between the two sides in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. He had been one of those who took part in MP's working group on the "sources, causes and current manifestations of antisemitism." (The nature of the participants at the heavily attended working group provides another glimpse of what the Jewish Caucus was up against in Durban: 80% Arabs/Muslims and western sympathizers, 10% Israelis virulently critical of Israel and a remaining 10% of Israeli, Jewish, and pro-Jewish activists).

MP met a delegate from a Bolivian aboriginal NGO who was effusive in his praise of the Bolivian Jewish community as the only one to care about aboriginal issues.

⁸ The Jewish people's movement of liberation, self-determination and self-realization. The State of Israel is affirmative action for Jews on a global scale.

⁹ CJC in May and June had written to a number of NGOs that accompanied the Canadian delegation to two prep coms in Geneva detailing the anti-Israel and anti-Jewish thrusts of the WCAR documents and warning of the possible derailing of the Conference.

¹⁰ One cannot be any more definite because of the process as previously described.

The NGO Forum document, in its antisemitism, therefore, cannot fairly be said to be representative of most Canadian WCAR participants. What can fairly be said is that there wasn't a public disavowal. This indictment stands even if, as partially mitigating circumstances, it is adduced that NGO agendas were all too single-issue specific and that NGOs (including the Jewish ones) were not organized into a Canadian caucus but were dispersed among the various caucuses.

There were those that did distance themselves from the odious anti-Israel language and expressed dissatisfaction with the process. These included the European, Eastern and Central European, Asian Descendants, and Cultural Diversity caucuses as well as Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, International Service for Human Rights, Physicians for Human Rights and the Lawyers Committee for Human Rights. The international human rights agencies, however, lacked the courage or the inclination openly and publicly to point the finger of blame at the pro-Palestinian forces for the derailment of the Forum.

High Commissioner Mary Robinson has been outspoken in her concern for the plight of the Palestinian people, but did not hesitate in refusing to submit the NGO document to the States' Conference because of its content as regards Israel, Zionism and the Jewish people. "I will always support civil society," Robinson stated, " but I am not able to do so now. Some paragraphs are very unhelpful. To a serious degree the language in these paragraphs is undermining my work. I cannot recommend it to the delegates.... It is the first time that I ever had to take this step."

Only a handful of government delegates were present to receive the document when submitted by an alternate. The document, in any case, could only be persuasive rather than prescriptive, and the States were under no obligation to be guided by any of it

The States' Conference

The anti- Israel and anti-Jewish elements in the NGO Forum's document already were present in the draft document, which the states brought to Durban, i.e. Zionism is racism, apartheid, ethnic cleansing, genocide, the Palestinian holocaust, and the stripping of the Holocaust and antisemitism of their singularity to the Jewish people. The only difference, in relative terms, was that the language in the states' document was less abominable.

Canada, even before its delegation went to Durban, at the various prep coms and in public pronouncements, had been unequivocal in opposing any language that attacked Israel and Zionism and sought to undermine the historical experience of the Jewish people. It expressed the hope that the WCAR focused on achieving its noble goals.¹¹

The role of Canadian Jewish Congress therefore was to ensure that there was no slackening in the government's resolve and to deny credibility to a misdirected

¹¹ CJC interacted on these issues with the Hon. John Manley, Minister of Foreign Affairs and the Hon. Hedy Fry, Secretary of State for Multiculturalism and the Status of Women, in March, July, and August 2001.

Conference aimed against Israel rather than against racism The decision by Minister of Foreign Affairs John Manley to boycott the Conference, reflected CJC's stated wish and was much appreciated.

The Hon. Hedy Fry, Secretary of State for Multiculturalism, ably headed the Canadian delegation in Durban, consisting of Paul Heinbecker, Canada's Ambassador to the UN, Lucy Edwards, Canadian High Commissioner to South Africa, Gil Scott, Executive Director, Canadian Secretariat - UN World Conference Against Racism, Artur M. Wilczynski, Senior Policy Advisor, International Relations Canadian Heritage, and many more from the appropriate government departments. It also included, among others, parliamentarian and noted human rights activist Irwin Cotler, who played a key positive role.

Canadian Jewish delegates, led by CJC's President, in a meeting with the Minister and the officials named above, asked that she walk out of the Conference when she came to the conclusion that there was no possibility for a changed document to be negotiated. The delegation stressed, as well, that a document in any way unchanged had to be rejected by Canada.

The Minister was absolutely firm that Canada would not stand for any language, no matter how minimal, that was anti-Israel/anti-Jewish. She and her entire team were especially sympathetic over the antisemitic atmosphere pervading the Conference and empathized completely with Jewish feelings.

Minister Fry manifested her steadfastness by:

- Forcefully condemning the speech Yasser Arafat¹² made to the Conference, in which he accused Israel of supremacism, racism, colonialism and ethnic cleansing. "This language," Minister Fry stated, "is totally unacceptable to Canada...."Such language," she added, "is even more unacceptable at a global conference...convened to break down intolerance, to build understanding and to develop strategies to combat racism."
- Stating in her speech to the plenary assembly of the states, that the Middle East issue had to be settled by the parties themselves through negotiation. "This conference," she declared categorically, "must avoid, and Canada will not endorse, any language that does not serve this basic objective."

When the United States and Israel announced their withdrawal from the Conference, CJC thought it especially important that they not have to go it alone, and reiterated a call for Canada to do the same.¹³ We appreciated Minister Fry explaining directly to us Canada's decision to remain. In her view there still was an opportunity to play a role in negotiating

¹² That Arafat and Fidel Castro were the two star heads of government in attendance in itself provided a sense of the Conference's thrust.

¹³ The Jewish delegates explained this position to the other Canadian NGOs. Overall, the latter felt that Canada should remain at the Conference. Jewish and non-Jewish delegates agreed to disagree.

the odious anti-Israel language out and correcting the problematic language on the Holocaust and antisemitism.

In the end, with the Conference going into overtime for one day, the final document included the declaration "that the Holocaust (capital H and singular) must never be forgotten." Anti-Semitism (sic) however, remained linked with Islamophobia.

Direct anti-Israel language was removed. Concern is expressed "about the plight of the Palestinian people under foreign occupation," but there is also a recognition of "the right to security for all states in the region, including Israel" and an appeal for "all states to support the peace process and bring it to an early conclusion." There is a generic statement about the right of return for refugees.

Israel expressed satisfaction at the final result, pointing to it as a defeat of the Arab/Muslim bloc¹⁴. Canada, it must be noted, issued a powerful "statement of reservation" regarding the final document.

The Canadian statement, as articulated by Minister Fry, expressed dissatisfaction with the Conference for having included the Israeli-Palestinian issue. It categorically opposed, the generic reference to the right of return for refugees, seeing it implicitly, if not explicitly, as very threatening to Israel. It eloquently and movingly explained that Canada stayed to the end "only because we wanted to have our voice decry the attempts at this Conference to de-legitimize the State of Israel, and to dishonour the history and suffering of the Jewish people." It decried the lack of "an independent and unlinked reference to the need for all of us to counter anti-Semitism (sic)." Truly, it can be said that it was Minister Fry's finest hour.

Conclusion

The centuries of suffering and exploitation endured by Africans and their descendants were highlighted and slavery was formally acknowledged for the crime against humanity that it was. There was broad understanding on measures to undo the damage globally inflicted on indigenous peoples. The plight of the Roma (gypsy) and Dalit (untouchables) were brought to the fore of world concern. These are but three of many examples that the Conference did engage considerably in work that was positive, both thoroughly identifying racist victimizations and developing corrective programmes of action.

¹⁴ Interestingly enough there now are suggestions that the Latin bloc has displaced it in influence.

The Arab/Muslim bloc also has antagonized Black Africa for its selfish insistence on an anti-Israel agenda, irrespective of its damaging effects on the Conference and the advancement of Black Africa's objectives. A key South African delegate is quoted as stating: "It's become obvious that the Arabs were hell bent on forcing through the agenda against Israel even if it meant wrecking Africa's vital objectives.... This is bound to affect the way we view those we thought were our brothers." Another African representative is quoted pointedly wondering "... what the Arabs have actually done for us black Africans."

Unfortunately, all too many Conference participants supported or surrendered to the pressure from the pro-Palestinian lobby allowing the deliberations to serve as venues for the promotion of a virulently anti-Israel agenda and the antisemitism that invariably accompanies such an effort. The result was an anti-racism Conference so irremediably tainted by racism that its credibility was nullified. At Durban the axiom that the fight against racism is indivisible, and that an attack on one group is an attack on all, was forgotten, seriously compromising the cause of anti-racism as a result.

The NGO Forum document, abominable as it is, stands officially unchallenged as a UN document and will be used in future by the enemies of Israel and the Jewish people both inside and outside the UN.¹⁵ It remains, however, to be seen how effective its use will be, considering the document's highly questionable legitimacy.

Awareness of the depth and breadth of any repudiation of antisemitism no doubt will influence the nature of future relations in Canada between CJC and fellow NGOs. It is encouraging that back in Canada, post Durban, non-Jewish colleagues in the anti-racism community have despaired that no leadership emerged out of the Canadian NGOs at the WCAR to galvanize them into a public and formal disavowal when witnessing the victimization to which their Jewish colleagues were being subjected.

That the Arab and Muslim bloc, with the greater or lesser support or indifference of many so-called non-aligned states, successfully placed the Israeli-Palestinian political conflict on the agenda gave the issue a credibility it did not at all deserve. However, the states' final document, despite its remaining problems, so clearly identified by Canada, was largely a shadow of its original self.

A united world Jewish community (in which CJC proudly played a part) together with the democracies of the free world (in which Canada played such a praiseworthy role) were in the end able to thwart, though far from fully, the efforts of the pro-Palestinian forces aimed against the state of Israel and the Jewish people.

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¹⁵ There already are examples of calls on one or two American campuses petitioning universities to divest themselves of Israeli investments, echoing similar calls that took place during the international fight against South African apartheid.