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World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance

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**SECRETARY-GENERAL URGES CONFERENCE TO MEET WORLD'S
EXPECTATIONS
WITH CALL FOR ACTION TO COMBAT RACISM**

Must Banish from New Century Hatred and Prejudice of Past

Following is the text of the opening address today by Secretary-General Kofi Annan to the World Conference against Racism in Durban, South Africa:

Yesterday South Africa lost a leader and our brother Thabo a father. May I ask you now to stand and observe a moment of silence.

Every one of us must feel the symbolism of this moment -- the conjunction of theme, of time and of place.

For decades the name of this country was synonymous with racism in its vilest form. But today, Mr. President, you and your fellow citizens have transformed its meaning -- from a by-word for injustice and oppression, into a beacon of enlightenment and hope, not only for a troubled continent, but for the entire world.

Where else, my friends, could we hold this conference? Who could teach us how to overcome racism, discrimination and intolerance, if not the people of this country? We salute you. We salute your leadership, Mr. President. We salute the heroic movement that you represent.

We salute Madiba, whose absence today we all regret, but whose presence, in a more profound sense, we all feel.

We salute the memory of all who struggled for justice and freedom in this country -- from Mohandas Gandhi to Oliver Tambo; from Steve Biko to Ruth First -- and, of course, Govan Mbeke, for whom we are all in mourning today.

And we also recognize the courage of F.W. de Klerk, who faced up to the inevitable and persuaded his own people to accept it.

But indeed, my friends, we are here to learn, not to celebrate. We are here to share experiences, perspectives and assessments -- of how far we have come, and how much further we must go, if racism is to be defeated.

One thing we can celebrate is the fact that racism is now universally condemned. Few people in the world today openly deny that human beings are born with equal rights.

But far too many people are still victimized because they belong to a particular group -- whether national, ethnic, religious, defined by gender or by descent.

Often this discrimination veils itself behind spurious pretexts. People are denied jobs ostensibly because they lack educational qualifications; or they are refused housing because there is a high crime rate in their community.

Yet these very facts, even when true, are often the result of discrimination. Injustice traps people in poverty, poverty becomes the pretext for injustice -- and so new wrongs are piled on the old.

In many places people are maltreated, and denied protection; on the grounds that they are not citizens but unwanted immigrants. Yet often they have come to a new country to do work that is badly needed, or are present not by choice but as refugees from persecution in their own country. Such people have a special need for protection, and are entitled to it.

In other cases indigenous peoples and national minorities are oppressed because their culture and self-expression are seen as threats to national unity -- and when they protest, this is taken as proof of their guilt.

In extreme cases -- which alas are all too common -- people belonging to such groups are forced from their homes, or even massacred, because it is claimed that their very presence threatens another people's security.

Sometimes these problems are in part the legacy of terrible wrongs in the past -- such as the exploitation and extermination of indigenous peoples by colonial Powers, or the treatment of millions of human beings as mere merchandise, to be transported and disposed of by other human beings for commercial gain.

The further those events recede into the past, the harder it becomes to trace lines of accountability. Yet the effects remain. The pain and anger are still felt. The dead, through their descendants, cry out for justice.

Tracing a connection with past crimes may not always be the most constructive way to redress present inequalities, in material terms. But man does not live by bread alone. The sense of continuity with the past is an integral part of each man's or each woman's identity.

Some historical wrongs are traceable to individuals who are still alive, or corporations that are still in business. They must expect to be held to account. The society they have wronged may forgive them, as part of the process of reconciliation, but they cannot demand forgiveness, as of right.

Far more difficult are the cases where individual profit and loss have been obscured by a myriad of other, more recent transactions -- yet there is still continuity between the societies and States of today and those that committed the original crimes.

Each of us has an obligation to consider where he or she belongs in this complex historical chain. It is always easier to think of the wrongs one's own society has suffered. It is less comfortable to think in what ways our own good fortune might relate to the sufferings of others, in the past or present. But if we are sincere in our desire to overcome the conflicts of the past, all of us should make that mental effort.

A special responsibility falls on political leaders, who have accepted the task of representing a whole society. They are accountable to their fellow-citizens, but also -- in a sense -- accountable for them, and for the actions of their predecessors. We have seen, in recent decades, some striking examples of national leaders assuming this responsibility, acknowledging past wrongs and asking pardon from -- or offering an apology to -- the victims and their heirs.

Such gestures cannot right the wrongs of the past. They can sometimes help to free the present -- and the future -- from the shackles of the past.

But in any case, Mr. President, past wrongs must not distract us from present evils. Our aim must be to banish from this new century the hatred and prejudice that have disfigured previous centuries.

The struggle to do that is at the very heart of our work at the United Nations. This year especially, at such events as the Conference on the Least Developed Countries, the Special Session on HIV/AIDS, or next month's Special Session on Children, we have often found racism and discrimination among the biggest obstacles to overcome.

And in our peacekeeping and peace-building work, we often find ourselves wrestling -- again and again -- with the effects of xenophobia and intolerance.

Only if we tackle these evils at source can we hope to prevent conflicts before they break out. And that means taking firm action to root them out in every society -- for, alas, no society is immune.

Last year, the leaders of our Member States resolved, in their Millennium Declaration, "to take measures to ensure respect for and protection of the human rights of migrants, migrant workers and their families, to eliminate the increasing acts of racism and xenophobia in many societies, and to promote greater harmony and tolerance in all societies".

With those words, Mr. President, they gave this conference its true agenda. We must not leave this city without agreeing on practical measures which all States should take to fulfil that pledge. It must be reflected in our budgets and development plans, in our laws and institutions -- and, above all, in our school curricula.

Let us remember that no one is born a racist. Children learn racism as they grow up, from the society around them -- and too often the stereotypes are reinforced, deliberately or inadvertently, by the mass media. We must not sacrifice freedom of the press, but we must actively refute pseudo-scientific arguments, and oppose negative images with positive ones -- teaching our children and our fellow citizens not to fear diversity, but to cherish it.

This conference has been exceptionally difficult to prepare, because the issues are not ones where consensus is easily found.

Yes, we can all agree to condemn racism. But that very fact makes the accusation of racism, against any particular individual or group, particularly hurtful. It is hurtful to one's pride, because few of us see ourselves as racists. And it arouses fear, because once a group is accused of racism it becomes a potential target for retaliation, perhaps for persecution in its turn.

Nowhere is that truer today than in the Middle East. The Jewish people have been victims of anti-Semitism in many parts of the world, and in Europe they were the target of the Holocaust -- the ultimate abomination. This fact must never be forgotten, or diminished. It is understandable, therefore, that many Jews deeply resent any accusation of racism directed against the State of Israel.

-- and all the more so when it coincides with indiscriminate and totally unacceptable attacks on innocent civilians.

Yet we cannot expect Palestinians to accept this as a reason why the wrongs done to them -- displacement, occupation, blockade, and now extra-judicial killings -- should be ignored, whatever label one uses to describe them.

But, my friends, mutual accusations are not the purpose of this conference. Our main objective must be to improve the lot of the victims.

Let us admit that all countries have issues of racism and discrimination to address. Rather than pick on any one country or region, let us aim to leave here with a commitment from every country to draw up and implement its own national plan to combat racism, in accordance with general principles that we will have agreed.

For weeks and months our representatives have laboured to reach agreement on those principles. And they have made great progress. Large parts of the Declaration and Programme of Action have been agreed, including texts on such difficult issues as indigenous peoples, migrants, refugees and "people of African descent".

Friends, this conference is a test of our international community -- of its will to unite on a topic of central importance in people's lives. Let us not fail this test. The build-up to this conference has prompted an extraordinary mobilization of civil society in many different countries. It has raised expectations which we must not disappoint.

If we leave here without agreement we shall give comfort to the worst elements in every society. But if, after all the difficulties, we can leave with a call to action supported by all, we shall send a signal of hope to brave people struggling against racism all over the world.

Let us rise above our disagreements. The wrangling has gone on for too long. Let us echo the slogan that resounded throughout this country during the elections of 1994, at the end of the long struggle against apartheid: SEKUNJALO. The time has come.

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