

# THE EVILS OF RACIAL DISCRIMINATION

*At the Third World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance  
Durban, 31 August, 2001*

Mr President, only a decade ago, the choice of South Africa as venue for a conference such as this would have been regarded as illusory. That was because this beautiful land was the theater for the most horrendous form of racism and racial discrimination the world had ever known.

Thanks however, to the heroic struggles of the men and women of South Africa, who, together with the combined efforts of the international community, vanquished the evil of apartheid, and significantly, at the dawn of a new century and a new millennium.

Let me pay tribute to the heroic and prolonged struggles that had taken place here and the great sacrifices that had been made to end racial hatred and bigotry. By act of providence, we still have in our midst, the one who personified that resistance and change, my Dear Brother, a distinguished gentleman, and a world statesman, **Mr Nelson Mandela**. He and his colleagues, like the illustrious son of Africa who has just passed away, **Govan Mbeki**, dedicated their lives to the pursuit of the restoration of the fundamental rights and human dignity of the people of their great country and indeed for the whole world.

But while apartheid may be gone, and the strategic confrontation between East and West may have been overcome, the larger and more pervasive threat of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and other forms of intolerance continue to manifest, in many respects, larger than before. The very fact that the nations of the world gather at the highest level to deliberate on such a theme, suggests that something is still amiss within and among nations.

Mr President, apart from apartheid, which was correctly identified as a State-institutionalised form of racism and thus attracted appropriate international sanctions against the State and its agents, no other form of racism has as yet been identified or classified as crime against humanity. No other individual or groups of States have been categorically identified as perpetrators of racialism. And there is hardly any attempt to identify or list victims.

Thus, general discourse on racism, tending to focus on the effects and ignoring the root causes, has consistently failed to appreciate a reality that is particularly brutal for us Africans namely, that: **we are the only race to have been victims of racial discrimination solely on the basis of our skin colour.**

It is imperative to recognise that the legacies of several centuries of racial exploitation, brutalisation and dehumanisation of Africans and people of African descent, through slavery, slave trade and colonialism, have had deep and fundamental consequences of poverty, underdevelopment, marginalisation, and de-linkage from the global march of human civilisation.

Such was the sordid, pervasive and conscience-bursting nature of the crime of slavery and slave trade, that Lord Palmerston - an Englishman - is on record for saying: "if all the crimes which the human race has committed from the creation down to the present day were added together in one vast aggregate, they would scarcely equal the amount of guilt which has been incurred by mankind in connection with this diabolical slave trade".

Today, Africans and people of African descent, still live with the consequences that the criminal nexus of slavery, slave trade and colonialism has wrought on our continent. Let me name a few: social instability; depopulation; destruction of African traditional institutions; underdevelopment; mental slavery; looting of African resources; dehumanisation of the African person; loss of self-confidence and lack of self-esteem; and dependency syndrome.

The colossal historical brutalities were insensitive, unfair, destructive and unconscionable. They constitute egregious human rights violations! They are the ultimate crime against humanity! It would be unavailing to argue that such crimes were legal at any time in history. Murder or intentional homicide has never been - and

can never be - legal in any legal system, since the creation of man. Abel's murder by his brother Cain incurred divine punishment from God their Maker.

Mr President, Durban provides a unique opportunity to redress some of these evils. We have the chance to confront the past and take the first steps towards our healing and universal reconciliation, based on justice, equality and solidarity. We must demonstrate the political will, and assume responsibility for the historical wrongs and injustices. It is owed to the memory of victims, and it is a reaffirmation of our one human family, that apology be extended by states which practised, benefitted and enriched themselves from slavery, slave trade and colonialism.

If I cannot be held responsible for the wrongs done by my forebears, I can apologise on their behalf for their misdeeds, especially when, directly or indirectly, I am a beneficiary of my forebears' perpetration of wrongs.

Apology is intrinsic in the healing process, and it constitutes veritable basis for demonstrating remorse for wrong done, and seeking atonement or forgiveness. It is imperative that we show our ingenuity by finding ways to ensure that we do not allow the history of slavery and colonialism to continue to plague the memory of the world. Whoever closes his eyes to the past is blind to the present. Apology closes the door against bitterness and anger in the heart of the victim, and does not connote any reprisal or litigation, nor should it lead to any.

I must, however, disabuse the minds of those who believe that every apology must be followed with monetary compensation for the victims. For us in Africa, an apology is a deep feeling of remorse, expressed with the avowed commitment that, **never again!** will the individual who offered the apology, have recourse to such reprehensible act. And the recipient of the apology forgives.

The issue of reparation then ceases to be a rational option. In any case, we must not forget that monetary compensation, as being proposed, may further hurt the dignity of Africans, and exacerbate the division between Africans on the continent and Africans in Diaspora. And yet this is a time for solidarity.

Special attention must be paid to new victim groups of exclusion – as emphasized in the regional preparatory reports for this Conference. We must attend to refugees, asylum seekers, migrants, Gypsies, trafficked

persons, and those of African descent living in the Americas and the Caribbean. We must also address new forms of exclusion, such as social, urban, educational and genetic apartheid. There is also a need to recognize that intolerance extends beyond race, to a full range of identity-based forms of discrimination, and concerns individuals who are daily discriminated against.

Education will be key, not only in terms of human rights education, as racist practices are deeply rooted in all our societies and entrenched in too many minds. To this end, we must commit ourselves to conduct educational and cultural programmes that will help sharpen critical analysis and self-reflection, identify the sources of racism, and enable the successor generations to grow and learn in an atmosphere of greater tolerance and better inter-human relations.

This then underlines the importance of leadership, and the heavy responsibility entrusted to leaders in all walks of life. We must strive to create, through the example of our own behaviour, attitudes and utterances within our communities and societies, and in relations with our neighbors and sometimes perceived adversaries, an atmosphere conducive to the eradication of racism, racialism and other forms of discrimination, and for the celebration and upholding of human rights.

It must be unacceptable irony for humanity, that side by side with so much available resources, there continues to exist suffocating poverty in the world. What is required to rid the world of absolute poverty of nations, and within nations, is political will which can only come from a world devoid of discrimination. It can only come from a world marching forward, without the hang up of the past wrongs done, but with equitability, justice, equality and fairness.

Mr President, we have a challenge to make this World Conference a landmark in the struggle to eradicate all forms of racism and racial discrimination. Persistent inequalities in the enjoyment of the most basic human rights, are not only wrong in themselves, they are a major cause of social upheaval and conflict.

Mr President, we have a duty to convey to people all over the world who have great expectations that this World Conference can - and should - positively impact on their lives. Let us make Durban a ground-breaking event by adopting declarations and plans of action that are capable of halting bigotry, prejudice, and discrimination. We have the sacred duty to transcend the barriers of our differences, and deal with the

fundamental issues that confront the weak and the defenseless in all societies. The time to act is now! And Durban should be the starting block for that race against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance.

I thank you all.