



# THE LUTHERAN WORLD FEDERATION

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## **After Durban Facing the Challenges of Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance**

Statement by Dr Ishmael Noko  
General Secretary, The Lutheran World Federation  
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The World Conference Against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance held in Durban, South Africa, 31 August-8 September 2001, was a unique opportunity for the over 160 states and many civil society organizations whose representatives gathered there to examine and address contemporary manifestations of racism and its related forms of discrimination and intolerance. The conference challenged all its participants, including many church representatives, to listen to victims and search out the roots of racism in our own communities and our attitudes. Some were ready to rise to the challenge; some were not.

During the days of the struggle against apartheid, many of us - nations, communities, churches and individuals - were able to externalize the problem in opposing institutionalized racism and discriminatory practices of South Africa's apartheid regime. In Durban, we were asked to examine the dark corners of our own "houses" where racism lurks. It is in part due to guilty resistance to this challenge of self-examination that the World Conference generated so much controversy.

Some have lamented over the level of confrontation that took place in Durban. But when addressing the gross, continuing, entrenched attitudes and practices of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance, confrontation is both inevitable and necessary. Such attitudes and practices must be confronted.

In confronting and redressing racism, however, "hate speech" and "reverse racism" sometimes emerge claiming anti-racist credentials. The World Conference was, unfortunately, not immune to this phenomenon. In Durban, one or two groups were responsible for the spreading of antisemitic images and messages of the most objectionable and distressing kind. The Lutheran World Federation categorically denounces the propagation and promotion of such attitudes, and deeply regrets that the actions of a few extremists inevitably coloured the international community's reaction to the legitimate concerns of the Palestinian people.

The recent developments in my own country Zimbabwe, made public as the World Conference was drawing to a close, demonstrate that it is possible to address the present consequences of a racist past and counter trends towards reverse racism. The agreement on the land question in Zimbabwe provided a positive counterpoint to the polarized discussion in Durban on reparations for past injustices. The injustices of slavery and colonialism must be redeemed in a way that is meaningful to those who continue to live in their shadow. A practical response to the issue of landlessness in many countries around the world is one of the keys to resolving these so-called "issues of the past" still prevalent to millions of

Whether the compromise agreement struck in Durban on these "issues of the past" represents real progress depends on the extent to which it will lead to genuine, rather than rhetorical, attention to the situations of the peoples and communities who carry the burden, rather than the benefit, of that past.

In the tense intergovernmental negotiations in Durban on the two or three most contentious issues, other critical issues, such as the situation of refugees and asylum-seekers, did not receive the attention that they should have from a world conference on racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance at the beginning of the 21st century.

Also very regrettable is that the situation of a quarter of a billion people who continue to suffer the effects of caste-based and similar forms of discrimination finds no mention in the World Conference declaration and programme of action. Just one government was responsible for preventing even a brief implicit reference to this form of discrimination ("discrimination based on work and descent") from being included in the conference's outcome. Nevertheless, despite this lack of reference in the conference's official documents, the Dalit communities of South Asia were so strongly and effectively represented in Durban that the battle for international recognition of their plight has already been won. I pray that this recognition will lead to action in effectively addressing the millennia-old oppression and discrimination suffered by these communities.

The World Conference Against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance was a historic success. It succeeded in bringing together representatives of over 160 governments and of very many communities and peoples who continue to suffer the effects of racism and its related forms of discrimination and intolerance. It succeeded in providing a forum in which the whole spectrum of issues of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance could be opened up and explored for the first time since the end of apartheid. There should be little surprise that this provoked controversy and confrontation, since such issues are inherently controversial and confrontational.

The real success of Durban, however, will be measured in the extent to which the issues raised, both formally and informally, and the various commitments made receive due attention and follow-up in the months and years to come. All those concerned by these issues - governments, intergovernmental organizations and civil society - should take this opportunity to recommit themselves to the ongoing daily struggle against racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance.

I pray that the churches, whose voices were so prominent in the struggle against apartheid, will take this occasion as a challenge both to raise again a loud prophetic voice against racism, and root out the racism that exists still within and among the churches themselves.

The struggle against racism is permanent, for racism springs up anew in varied forms despite all efforts to eliminate it. The struggle against racism is universal, no society is free of this scourge. The struggle against racism is an ethical imperative, since racism denies the inherent God-given dignity of every human being.

Let us all take up the struggle.