



THE LUTHERAN WORLD FEDERATION

LUTHERISCHER WELTBUND - FEDERACIÓN LUTERANA MUNDIAL - FÉDÉRATION LUTHÉRIENNE MONDIALE

Office of the General Secretary

The persistence of racism and related discrimination

Facing up to the challenges at the World Conference Against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance

Statement by Dr. Ishmael Noko
General Secretary, Lutheran World Federation
27 August 2001

The apartheid regime in southern Africa institutionalized attitudes that denied the God-given dignity and equal human rights of all people. It therefore provoked the outrage and resistance of the people it oppressed, and drew the just condemnation of churches, civil society groups and governments around the world. The fact that principles of justice and universal human rights ultimately prevailed over the exclusion and oppression of the apartheid regime lends a special significance to the choice of South Africa as the venue for the World Conference Against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance.

However, more than a decade after the end of apartheid in South Africa, racism and racial discrimination, the attitudes expressed in the institutions of apartheid, remain a blight upon human societies in all parts of the world. Acknowledgment of this simple and regrettably self-evident fact would be a good place to start, as government and civil society representatives from almost all nations of the world gather in Durban for the World Conference.

The peoples of my country, Zimbabwe, and of many other countries in this region and elsewhere, had their land and right of self-determination taken away from them under the racist assumptions of colonialism. This is a historical reality that must be *redeemed*. But, even as I affirm the necessity of addressing the issue of the just redistribution of land in the aftermath of colonialism, I know with certainty that redemption of these wrongs will not be achieved through reverse discrimination and violence. Righting the systemic racist wrongs of the colonial past is a proper and necessary topic of discussion, as is also the rejection of the present stirrings of a violent reverse discrimination.

As a church leader, I acknowledge the history and persistence of racism and racial discrimination within the churches, and declare it a contradiction of Christ's love and sacrifice for all people. The church has a continuing and unfulfilled mission to live out Christian unity through an active rejection of all forms of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance. Such attitudes are totally inconsistent with the core teachings of the church.

The persistence of racism and racial discrimination is due to the projection of our fears and vulnerabilities upon the 'other'. As individuals and societies, we must be liberated from those fears, which are all too readily manipulated for political and other purposes.

The World Conference gives the international community a precious opportunity to address the

continuing challenges of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance in a genuine and practical way, acknowledging and learning from the injustices and the successes of the past and present. The voices of the victims are our best guide in this process, and they must be given the opportunity to speak of their suffering. The real challenge of this World Conference will be to have the courage to hear their stories and to respond not with argument and self-justification but with practical solutions and ways of redeeming past and present injustices.

Those suffering entrenched and systemic discrimination based on caste or descent should not be met with legalistic arguments over the definition of 'racism'. Palestinians subjected to daily suffering simply because they are Palestinian should not be told that the problem is a 'political' one and therefore cannot be addressed from the perspective of justice. Nor should the history and re-emergence of antisemitism, expressed most terribly in the Holocaust, be in any way minimized to suit prevailing political agendas. And those whose lands have been plundered and taken away from them on the basis of racist assumptions have a right to be heard and to claim redress.

Without confession and redemption, there is no reconciliation. Reducing the critical issues and experiences of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance to sanitized generalities will not help us to address those wrongs. I pray that the participants in the World Conference in Durban will be inspired by the spirit of struggle and freedom that brought an end to the oppression of apartheid, against all the obstacles of politics and power. I pray that, so inspired, we will all grasp this opportunity to face up to the continuing challenges of racism and racial discrimination and to commit ourselves to overcoming them.