

Debacle in Durban

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Two follies, both with track records, were on full display at the recent United Nations conference on racism held in Durban, South Africa: Arab and Islamic states persisted in their misguided effort to brand Zionism as inherently racist, and the U.S. again demonstrated that its commitment to international negotiation is at best nominal.

The Durban conference was to have examined racism in its many contemporary forms—from India’s caste system to the practices of slavery and its aftermath of racial discrimination in the U.S. Casting light on this persistent global evil, and mustering collective action to confront it, are tasks suited to UN leadership. But this urgently needed initiative was frustrated when Arab and Islamic states once again used the forum to score political points against Israel.

UN Secretary General Kofi Annan himself opposes the Zionism-racism equation. In a 1998 address Annan said that “it is difficult to overestimate” the “negative resonance” of the UN General Assembly’s 1975 resolution to equate Zionism with racism. “Fortunately,” Annan noted, “the General Assembly rescinded the resolution in 1991.” Unfortunately, the negative resonances continue.

To decry Israel’s behavior toward the Palestinians as the unjust oppression by a stronger force of a weaker population is not the same as saying that Zionism itself is racist. The racism conference was the wrong platform and the proposed resolution on Zionism as “based on racial superiority” was the wrong language with which to address the Middle East conflict. Neither Zionism nor racism determines Israel’s current conduct toward Palestinians. It is driven, rather, by Israel’s fear that its own security is threatened by a hostile Palestinian people, along with the political conviction that this threat must be met with stringent controls.

U.S. ruling circles have avoided international conferences on racism in part because of antagonistic language—such as that used at Durban—aimed at Israel. Rather than deigning to confront these charges of racism, the U.S. stayed away from two previous UN racism conferences—in 1978 and 1983—and sent only a low-level delegation to this year’s conference. When it became apparent that the U.S. would

not be able to persuade delegates to avoid attacking Israel, that delegation was called home by Secretary of State Colin Powell.

The delegation's departure is yet another display of aloof unilateral conduct on the part of the U.S. Repeatedly, when important international issues are on the table, including global warming, biological warfare, nuclear defense strategy, and now racism, the Bush administration has chosen detachment over diplomacy. Rather than abandoning the fray at Durban, the U.S. should have remained as a participant among equals and used the opportunity to oppose any resolution it found odious, while addressing the many other instances of racism which demand the world's attention. This was the course of action followed by the U.S.'s European allies. On the international as well as on the domestic level, politics is an arena that requires participants to forgo demanding opponents' unconditional surrender, and to tough it out to find solutions to seemingly intractable problems—like racism.