

HIGHLIGHTS OF DAILY PRESS BRIEFING

21 April 2009

Ramu Damodaran, Spokesman for the Durban Review Conference, noted that, as regards Conference participation, 143 States have registered to attend the Conference, out of which 104 have collected their accreditation. (This number only reflected the States who requested a badge for delegates without a UNOG grounds pass). Additionally, as of this morning, there were 283 accredited NGOs to the event from which 874 individuals were attending the event. A revised list of speakers for the high-level and general segments was also available indicating a total of 103 speakers inscribed to speak during these segments.

The Spokesman announced that the Main Committee of the Conference will meet at 3 p.m. this afternoon which would decide on the procedure and the timing of transmittal of the draft outcome document to the plenary for its consideration. Attention was also drawn to a series of **side events** scheduled over the course of today and tomorrow in parallel to the plenary session.

Responding to a question posed at yesterday's briefing, Mr. Damodaran informed journalists that the estimated budget for the Conference was 675,200 USD, which included costs for interpreters, translation of documents, conference service assistants, printing and distribution of documents and sound technicians for the weeklong event. (This figure did not cover webcasting services nor press coverage).

In response to questions on the incidents involving NGOs, Rupert Colville, Spokesman for the OHCHR, clarified that there were 13 NGO representatives who had their badges withdrawn and one member of the press as well. Responding to a follow up, the NGOs who were affected by these measures were the 'Union des Etudiants Juifs de France, the European Union of Jewish Students and the Women's Association of Followers of Ahlul Baitii and the Neda Institute.

Asked to comment on the participation of the President of Iran in the Conference, Mr. Damodaran stated that governments had the prerogative of deciding whom they designate to represent their State at such inter-governmental events. Attention was also drawn to the statements made by the Secretary-General and the High Commissioner for Human Rights which took exception to the content to some of the remarks made by the Iranian President yesterday in his speech to the gathering.

Asked how the events of yesterday had affected the process, Mr. Damodaran said the tone after first speaker was immediately restored after the second speaker and they were able to get back on track with the real purpose of the Conference to focus on the needs and legitimate expectations of victims and to devise institutional processes at the national, international and civil society level to be able to meet those expectations and aspirations. The Conference was back on track, he stated. Mr. Colville added that there had been several sentiments expressed by various States subsequently indicating that the one speaker in question should not be allowed to derail the process. He said he believed all the States that had left the room yesterday, with the exception of the Czech Republic, were back in the room today.

Asma Jahangir, Chairperson of the Coordination Committee on Special Procedures and Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion and belief, emphasized that she and her colleagues strived to speak out for victims of human rights violations and,

while undertaking their work, often worked risky and humiliating circumstances. While the Special Procedures had one foot inside an intergovernmental organization they carried out their work independently. She noted that many of her colleagues had made concrete contributions to the **DDPA** of 2001.

Asked whether there was anything in the draft outcome text that constituted a violation as regards freedom of expression and religious intolerance, Ms. Jahangir said she believed the text was acceptable although she had hoped it would be more proactive. The Special Procedures were of the view that freedom of religion cannot thrive without freedom of expression. One cannot look at race and religion in the same basket. She added that there was a tendency to mix race and religion together which led to confusions which should be addressed.

Asked for her views on the remarks made yesterday by the President of Iran through which he linked Zionism to racism, she said it was regrettable and said she aligned herself to the sentiments purporting that this was a disservice to the people of Iran, a country of cultural values. She said it was regretful the Conference started off of the wrong footing but said she was hopeful it would get back on track. Personally, she said she firmly believed in freedom of expression regardless of how obnoxious it may be. Whether it was intolerant or not, depended on who said it. Statements from people in public positions which were intolerant should be frowned upon.

Responding to a question on defamation of religion, she said in the context of international law there was no such thing as defamation of religion; however, there was incitement on the basis of religion. If one took the notion of defamation of religion that meant all debates on religions had to be asphyxiated. The notion of the defamation of religion was not only detrimental to the mandate of freedom of religion but also to the whole concept of human rights.

Responding to another question on the participation of President Ahmadinejad, Ms. Jahangir said the question of deepening democracy was the key; through this deepening one will be able to get leadership that bore the responsibility of their words and would emit a true reflection of their societies. The democratization of countries had to be taken more seriously not just by the UN but by all.

In response to another question, Ms. Jahangir said the Special Procedures would do all they could to ensure the outcome of the Conference had more power and resonated well with people.

Responding to another question, the Special Rapporteur said since September 11th the space for human rights had been narrowed both in the UN and around the world. There was no denying the fact that Muslims all over the world had felt stigmatized and that there was more anti-Semitic rhetoric. It was hoped that things were moving back to pre-September 11th days.