

**TRANSCRIPT OF STATEMENTS BY SECRETARY-GENERAL  
AND HIGH COMMISSIONER FOR HUMAN RIGHTS AT PRESS CONFERENCE  
ON OPENING OF DURBAN REVIEW CONFERENCE**

Following is a transcript of the remarks by United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon and United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights Navi Pillay made at a press conference in the Palais des Nations at the end of the opening day of the Durban Review Conference. The Review Conference, which runs from 20 to 24 April in Geneva, will assess progress made since the 2001 World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance held in Durban, South Africa.

**The UN Secretary-General:** Ladies and gentlemen, it is a great pleasure to see you again.

One of the primary roles of the United Nations is to mobilize action against the pervasive violations of human rights that take place in every part of our world. The fight against racism has been a core part of that mandate since the Organization's founding. And it is the evil of racism that I want you, as members of the media, to stress to your audiences.

Some people point to great strides that the world has made recently as evidence that racism is going away. But I am here to tell you that we still have to do much more. In fact, despite decades of advocacy, and despite the elaboration of a far-reaching legal framework, racism is something that we're still living with. Despite the efforts of many United Nations human rights bodies, and despite ample evidence of racism's terrible toll, millions upon millions of people continue to fall victim.

Ladies and gentlemen,

I want to take a few moments to tell you about something that seems especially sad to me right now. In the world that we are living in today, we have children that are growing up thinking that they are inferior simply because of the colour of their skin or the shape of their features.

And yet, it is not their stories that are being brought to the forefront now. In this regard, I deplore the use of this august platform by the Iranian President to accuse, divide and even incite. This is the opposite of what this Conference seeks to achieve.

This makes it significantly more difficult to build constructive solutions to the very real problem of racism.

It is deeply regrettable that my plea to look to the future of unity was not heeded by the Iranian President. At my earlier meeting this morning with him, I stressed the importance of the Conference to galvanize the will of the international community toward the common cause of the fight against racism.

We must all turn away from such a message in both form and substance.

We must join hands and work together to achieve a constructive, substantive agenda to combat racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance.

It has been painful to see divisiveness where we should have had unity and a common sense of resolve. Racism is truly a global issue, and we need it to be discussed at a global level, however sensitive and difficult that may be.

I always believed it is far better being inside the room, making one's case, than standing aside and depriving others of additional perspectives and approaches. That is what the United Nations is all about – people coming together from all walks of life to engage in dialogue and find common ground so that all members of our global community can live in peace and dignity. And that is why I am here today.

I appeal to all to see this as the beginning of a process. It is not an end. Obviously, we have much work to do. We need to build on the progress we have made and grow beyond the divisions that prevent us from moving ahead.

I will now give the floor to High Commissioner Navi Pillay and I will be very happy to answer your questions afterwards. Thank you.

**High Commissioner for Human Rights Navi Pillay:** Thank you, Mr. Secretary-General. First of all I want to mention how important it is for the Durban Review Conference that we have the Secretary-General come from New York to participate in this event. His speech sets out, as did mine, the principle goals of this Conference.

As you know, I have been speaking with some of you on a regular basis. We have been working for many months on the outcome document of this Conference. And I now have before us a document that has been accepted by all the regional groups, including States in Europe who have since decided to stay away from the Conference.

This outcome document is likely to be adopted fairly soon – in the next two days. I begin by mentioning this because, for me, what's important is the goal of this Conference, and that is for millions of victims all over the world. [For them,] this Conference is very important; they look to the States to come up with some global guidelines, global strategies to implement best practices to combat racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerances. And we are looking for practices that will then filter down these measures that we devise at the global level to go to regional levels and national levels. And that is the goal. That is my goal as High Commissioner of Human Rights. I speak for victims; and I keep that vision straight before me.

I want to join in the comments made by the Secretary-General on the address made by the President of Iran this afternoon. I join with the Secretary-General in utterly deploring the speech. In my view, I think it is improper for a United Nations forum to be used for political grandstanding and I find this totally objectionable. Much of the speech of the President of Iran was clearly beyond the scope of the Conference, which is, as you all know, racism, racial discrimination and action plans to implement the undertakings made by the States eight years ago.

That is the scope of the Conference. And this would have been clear to you as you followed the speeches made by the large number of Ministers who addressed the Conference, and are still doing so, after the President spoke. Each one of

these Ministers showcased how they had addressed these problems in their own countries. And this is what I consider as the scope of the Conference. And this is what I would have expected the President of Iran to come and tell us: how is he addressing racial discrimination and intolerances in his country.

It also clearly went against the longstanding United Nations position adopted by the General Assembly with respect to equating Zionism with racism. We have always urged that we respect United Nations General Assembly positions and United Nations positions with regard to recognition of States and statehood, and of course the names by which we call States.

However, here, I want to emphasize that to me the best riposte to this type of event is to reply, to correct, and not to walk away; not to withdraw and boycott the Conference. If that happens, who is going to provide a rational response to what had been said?

Fortunately, we have some very good examples of other speakers. I refer you to the speech delivered by the Norwegian Foreign Minister, who spoke immediately after the President of Iran, in which the Foreign Minister of Norway said, and I quote: "Norway is ready to accept the text as it stands. Exaggeration, divisive and extreme statements from the floor cannot change that fact."

I applaud these sentiments. We definitely need to value that we have an outcome document which has provisions adopted by all the regional groups and with which we plan to move on.

Of course, I also noted that what was said in the President's speech has had nothing to do with the substance of the Conference. And so it should have nothing to do with the results, which are embodied in the draft outcome document.

Generally, I feel that if you focus on this one intervention you would be doing a great disservice to the outcome of this Conference and a great disservice to the expectations of victims of racism.

Finally, a very short word. I left in the middle of the speech being delivered by the Secretary-General of the Organization of the Islamic Conference and I hope that you will make reference to his speech when you get copies. He began by saying that he was speaking for 57 members of the Organization of the Islamic Conference. So here is a speech, a very reasoned speech, focusing on the Conference theme, delivered by a powerful alternate voice, which addressed the issues and which speaks for the Arab States.

Thank you very much.

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Following these statements, the floor was opened to questions from journalists.

**Question:** Mr. Secretary-General, after the Iranian President misused the United Nations Conference which was opened today, do you think that he should be sanctioned and do you have more understanding for those who decided from the very beginning not to be here, fearing that this is exactly what was going to be?

And two questions to the High Commissioner: do you have the feeling that the Iranian President sabotaged your Conference? And what do you feel about those who, from the very beginning, [decided not to] come to the Conference?

**The Secretary-General:** For me, this is something to be determined by the General Assembly, not by the Secretary-General.

**The High Commissioner:** Your first question was whether some kind of penalty provision can be used against the President. You know, I always refer to my previous life as a judge. It is so easy to ask people to leave the courtroom and to charge them with contempt of court. But this is the United Nations, and everybody has a right to speak, and more especially the head of State. And that was his right.

Now to your next question, whether I consider whether he sabotaged the Conference. I don't think so unless we let him do that. So here I would appeal that you focus on what I said [with regard to] all the important work that has been done for this Conference. We should not then let one person who has come with these unsavoury remarks – and who did not use the opportunity of this Conference to tell us more about how his country dealt with issues of racism – we should not allow this one intervention to mar the Conference. It is something that has happened. I prefer to move on.

**Question:** The Iranian President has been known to use several platforms to accuse, divide and even incite. So, were you surprised by that, that he used the United Nations platform to do that? Could this have been avoided? And do you still think countries that pulled out were wrong for pulling out of the Conference?

**The Secretary-General:** It is deplorable that the very august chamber of the Assembly [Hall] of the United Nations has been misused to divide and accuse and even to incite. Every Member State of the United Nations has due responsibility to fully respect the general rules and regulations of the United Nations and also [to pay] due respect to the Member States of the United Nations. In that regard, as I said in my statement, it is a very deplorable situation.

I really urge again, very strongly, that Member States, particularly Iran, should fully respect [others] so that other Member States could also express their views. Every Member State has the right to speak what they believe. But, at the same time, that kind of expression of position should be pertinent to the subject which we are now discussing. We are discussing how we can strengthen our common efforts to fight against racism and racial discrimination. Those are just unacceptable practices in the twenty-first century. How long do we have to suffer from these kinds of practices. In the name of humanity, racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance should be eliminated. This is what we are doing; this is why we are here.

**High Commissioner:** I of course was hoping against hope that the President of Iran would respect the parameters of this Conference. I was just shocked and deeply saddened by everything he said. And he also departed from the cardinal rule of this Conference that we deal with the Conference in terms of themes and concepts rather than focusing on any one country. So he departed from that as well.

I don't think though that his behaviour provides any justification for any other Member State to walk out of this Conference. I mean, whose Conference is this but Member States? There are 4,000 [delegates of] non-governmental organizations (NGOs) registered to participate in this Conference. They would

have loved to have been sitting in that Hall and having the opportunity to make statements, as Member States do.

So if one State, such as happened here in the case of Iran, makes statements that we all disagree with, then where is the alternate voice that would set out the positive lines? Fortunately, a number of Ministers – I've already addressed this – they've said that States should not walk out of a Conference; they should remain and state their position. This was, as I said, stated quite strongly by Norway.

**Question:** I am wondering, after all the events today – and there have been quite a lot – I mean the day started with several key States not participating, some of them having participated in a negotiation of a text agreed on and then said it was unacceptable, followed by the remarks from Iran, discussed here as objectionable and deplorable, even after a meeting with the Secretary-General just before. And then, some other States walking out instead of responding in the forum. I wonder if you could comment on whether we will look back on this as quite a difficult day for diplomacy and for the United Nations, as well as if it will be difficult to move on, both for the Conference and in general?

**Secretary-General:** First of all, it was a very troubling experience for me as the Secretary-General. I have not experienced this kind of destructive proceedings in an assembly, in a conference, by any one Member State. It was a totally unacceptable situation.

At the same time, there were some Member States and also some NGOs in the gallery that were not behaving in accordance with rules and regulations. This was again very much regrettable that some Member States they have not respected the accepted rules and regulations of the Conference. This was very much regrettable and was very much disruptive to the smooth running of the Conference. This should not happen in the future. I hope the President of the Conference will take some disciplinary measures on this in the future.

Now, I believe the subject of this Conference, racism, is too important for anyone to remain outside of this Conference Hall. Therefore, from the beginning of this process, I and High Commissioner Navi Pillay have been working tirelessly to talk to the Member States, each and every Member State, which would have a difference of opinion. It is natural in multilateral settings that there is always a difference of opinion. And I respect diversity. And this is exactly the main purpose of the United Nations, where all this diversity is coordinated and compromised with a sense of flexibility and compromise and cooperation and mutual respect.

We have come a long way and we have arrived at a very agreeable consensual text now. The Preparatory Committee has recommended to the Conference the consensus adoption of this document. It is far better than the one adopted previously in 2001.

Therefore, if some country has some difference of opinion, it is far better to come inside the Hall and express their positions. But if there is no expression of such positions, how can Member States address the differences of opinions?

Just remember that we have come such a long way in a very delicate and very sensitive process. I really appreciate and commend the sense of flexibility and compromise by many Member States which have really helped to reach this process. As I said, this is not the end of the process, this is just the beginning of the process. We have to continue and to build on this.

**Question:** I would like to come back to last Friday when an agreement was reached on the text. At that moment it seemed that an important step had been made in healing the wounds of 2001. After what has happened today it seems that we are two steps backward and I would like your view about it and how difficult it would be in the future to organize another such Conference.

**Secretary-General:** I would repeat what we have been doing to bring all the members of the international community to come together to this Hall. Again, it is regrettable that some have chosen to stay aside. This shows how difficult and complex the issue of racism is. We suffered for hundreds and hundreds of years because of racism. This still persists. The whole international community must work together, collectively, to address this issue with a strong commitment for tolerance and mutual respect and a deeper appreciation of faith, religion and traditions. All human beings should be respected regardless of where one was born or how one was born. This is the main core principle of the United Nations Charter.

Now, we will have to continue to do more. This is a good start again after eight years and we are encouraged by this consensus agreement which we will adopt soon.

On the basis of this text, I urge all Member States of the United Nations to implement in their own national domestic policies all the recommendations and to try and coordinate among us. That is what I am really emphasizing to all Member States.

**The High Commissioner:** You are quite right of course. By Friday [evening, all participating] States had approved that document by consensus and they authorized unanimously the Chair of the Preparatory Committee to send it to the Conference for consideration and adoption. And that's where I was on Friday night, when I went to bed thinking, "Job well done".

So, you will have to find out what happened over the weekend. Because – apart from the United States, whose Ambassador Susan Rice afforded me the courtesy of calling me ahead to inform me that the United States was not participating and gave me her reasons and gave me the gist of the statement they were going to publish – I have yet to hear from any of the European States who withdrew that they had withdrawn and that this or that were their reasons. If it were not for you, the media, I would have been in the dark. So, I hope you would find out what happened.

But, as the Secretary-General says, negotiation has to continue on these matters. Diplomacy and dialogue are all that we have. So we have to continue talking with States and trying to build consensus.

I am heartened by the statement made by President Obama, when he was asked a question, that although he had reasons not to participate in the Durban Review Conference, he would engage in any genuine efforts to address the issue of racism. And knowing the States in Europe that have withdrawn, for whatever reasons, I imagine they are political reasons, they are reasons related to their national interest, but I know that since they were all part of the consensus that adopted this document that they also will ultimately engage in the process of implementing these provisions.

**Question:** High Commissioner, in your speech you made reference to the increase in racial discrimination and your concerns about the resurgence in prejudice and the scarcity of resources, and also about the hopes of millions of

people being pinned on this. With reference to the global food insecurity, there was a G8 summit that closed today in Italy and the other day in this room one of the senior officials said over a 100 million people would be added to poverty, so what is your message as the people at the bottom of the queue are not getting a voice here?

**The Secretary-General:** This morning in my opening statement I made it quite clear that poverty, development and racism – they are all interconnected. A mentioned food security issues. I mentioned the Millennium Development Goals. I have been working in a comprehensive way on how we can address all these global issues, starting from food security, the development crisis, the climate change crisis and, on top of all of this, the global economic crisis.

That is what the United Nations, and I as Secretary-General, have been dealing with in close coordination with G20 leaders and also members of the G77. Still, there are 1 billion people who go to bed hungry every night and this situation has deteriorated after the onset of the financial crisis. We are working very hard on this. I am now working in close coordination the World Bank and the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) to create a special financial mechanism to help those people – small holding farmers – who do not have any capacity, who do not have any agricultural inputs. That is where we are putting our best efforts at this time.

I know that when there is absolute despair this will breed distrust and that can create all this intolerance and distrust which involves into regional and global troubles, global instabilities. That is why I am urging and doing [my all] to address all these issues in a comprehensive way.

**The High Commissioner:** I would invite you to see the video we have on “Voices of victims” which just clearly shows you that poverty is related so closely to racial discrimination. [It is] the poorest of the poor, and they are the ones who are discriminated [against], who suffer the most because of the food shortage. Also I want to point to the value of the question you have raised – and that it affects hundreds of millions of people – because I want to bring back to you why I feel the situation is so serious. There is no room for political posturing by some States because somebody who traditionally makes obnoxious statements has once again done so.

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