

Durban Review Conference - Side-event
Voices
20 April 2009
Palais des Nations, Permanent Gallery Space, Third floor E-Building, 14h30 to 15h

Opening remarks by Ms. Kyung-wha Kang
Deputy High Commissioner for Human Rights

Dear Colleagues,
Distinguished Participants,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am very pleased to welcome you at the opening of this VOICES event series. The Durban Review Conference will devote countless words to racism, racial discrimination and xenophobia. Those words will appear and resonate in the statements of Ministers and Ambassadors, in research papers and studies, in civil society's advocacy, and in thoughtfully crafted paragraphs of intent. But amid all of this great and important weight of words, we must never forget that such words must both convey and address real experiences in the lives, struggle and suffering of individuals.

Indeed, this Review Conference is undertaking the vital task of changing lives and societies for the better by confronting racism and seeking solutions to this global scourge. Let us always keep at the forefront of our minds the deeply human nature of our task.

Helping us to do so are the individuals who have gathered in Geneva to participate in this VOICES event series and relate their very personal experiences of racism. They come from many different countries and all regions of the world. For the shameful reality is that no country is immune from racism and intolerance. It is this knowledge that brings us all together here. Our purpose is to denounce and seek remedies for these scourges anywhere and everywhere. Thus, the fifteen individuals who will speak to us over the course of this week will make their voices heard on behalf of the millions worldwide who could not join us, but whose stories need to be told, whose plight must be addressed, and whose suffering demands to be alleviated.

Sometimes it is hard to hear the voices of individuals amid the high rhetoric of international politics and diplomacy. I am therefore particularly proud of the fact that this VOICES event series is taking place and of the role of the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights in its organization.

These VOICES events are meant for individual testimonies to be delivered and carefully listened to. You, the VOICES participants, have taken the courageous step to come here and speak out for human rights and against racism. You do this every day, often in the face of intimidation, abuse or even extreme violence. Human rights defenders, such as you, have an important place at this conference and will play a pivotal role in its aftermath. It is the international community's collective responsibility to respond to your messages with deeds rather than just rhetoric. I sincerely hope that this conference will do justice to your call and deliver concrete action to engineer change that makes a difference.

The VOICES event format was first inaugurated at the World Conference in Durban in 2001, under the admirable guidance and organization of Ms. Gay McDougall, Independent Expert of the Human Rights Council on Minority Issues. The event was one of the most memorable and compelling attractions of the 2001 conference. I have no doubt that this VOICES event series in Geneva this week, once again under the guidance of Prof. McDougall will be an equally powerful and influential magnet and catalyst for action. On behalf of all of us, I wish to express my gratitude to her for her leadership and energy.

Dear Friends,

Let me conclude by saying that you are not simply participating in a side event at this conference. You are, in a very real sense, the *main* event. Your stories represent the challenges that we are all here to confront. They will inspire and remind us of the very real effects of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance on lives everywhere. I wholeheartedly thank you and welcome you.