

**Durban Review Conference - Side-event  
Voices**

**24 April 2009**

**Palais des Nations, Permanent Gallery Space, Third floor E-Building, 14h30 to 15h**

**Closing remarks by Ms. Navanethem Pillay  
High Commissioner for Human Rights**

Dear Colleagues,  
Distinguished Participants,  
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a great pleasure to join you at the closing of this VOICES event series. Racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance constitute a global human tragedy blighting the lives and destroying the futures of men, women and children everywhere.

We must always ensure that the voices of the victims are heard and resonate as often as possible in order to better tailor protection measures on the ground. Events such as the VOICES series provide a reality check in the context of international meetings where diplomatic discourse holds sway. Nations are represented in the conference halls and decision making forums, however, affected individuals must also be present to remind Governments of progress, but also of commitments that remain unfulfilled, and ultimately to demand results that truly steer change. As history demonstrates, including in regard to my own country where apartheid once reigned, individuals who speak out can and do alter the course of nations towards justice and equality.

I cannot overemphasize the importance of your voices here this week. In the course of my life and career, I have experienced first hand the nefarious effects of racism. As a judge and President of the International Court on Rwanda, I have heard countless testimonies from people that have paid the ultimate price of ethnic hatred. Theirs are stories that will remain with me for the rest of my life.

When the struggle for human rights seems uphill and the barriers to justice too formidable, such testimonies inspire me, as I know they have motivated many others. I recall the profound

silence of audiences that accompanies the sharing of such harrowing personal experiences. I know that the lives of those who learn from them are changed forever.

The struggle against racial discrimination and intolerance has been and will remain long and arduous. However, the momentum is growing because this struggle is on the right side of history. You raised your voices loudly and courageously against racism. Those who support and advocate hatred have never felt so heavily the weight of condemnation and revulsion against them.

In this setting, an exhibition kindly sponsored by the Government of Rwanda, we are reminded of the most brutal extremes of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance that are manifested in genocide and mass atrocities. We must never forget such horrific events, but we must also recall that they have their roots in more everyday evils.

The scourge of racism affects millions of people in all regions of the world in a variety of smaller but nevertheless profoundly damaging ways. It may be so engrained and institutionalized that it often goes unreported. But the victims do take notice every day of every instance of humiliation and discrimination. I believe that we must reach out further and deeper into societies everywhere, not just to challenge those who actively or violently support racism, but also to persuade those who would turn a blind eye to speak out against the hatred and prejudice that they witness around them and that poison their communities.

The nations present at this global conference all have a commitment to take its message back to the cities, towns and villages of their people. This message must be that equality, justice and non-discrimination are not only the demands of a few; they are also the very foundations upon which we build our strong, diverse and peaceful societies together.

I wish to conclude by once again thanking Gay McDougall for being a driving force behind this important VOICES event series and for helping to make it such a success. I am equally grateful to all those who came to learn and who, I have no doubt, leave affected and moved as much as I am. But most of all I want to wholeheartedly thank the participants who gathered here in Geneva to make sure that their message would be shared and enrich all of us.

Thank you.