

B'nai B'rith International's concerns for the seventh regular session of the Human Rights Council, together with the Coordinating Board of Jewish Organizations

Item 9: Durban Review

Mr. President:

When we spoke before the council last year on this issue, we were very concerned about the preparations for a review of the 2001 World Conference Against Racism, Racial Discrimination and Related Intolerance in Durban, South Africa. Our concerns have not abated and in fact have worsened.

We want to express our concern with a preparatory committee that selected for its bureau Libya and Iran as chair and vice chair. Iran has repeatedly called for Israel's delegitimization and destruction and perpetuated antisemitism by denying the Holocaust. Most recently Libya used its position in the Security Council to block a resolution condemning a barbarous killing in a Jewish religious school. Both countries continuously use various UN bodies as a battle tool in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict to initiate and support resolutions condemning Israel's actions of self-defense. We fear that an executive committee composed as such is more than likely to repeat the problems that plagued the 2001 conference.

At that time, antisemitism was not included in the agenda and blatant attempts were made by numerous member states, many of which are current Human Rights Council members, to exclude antisemitism as part of the UN's agenda on racism and intolerance. Some went so far as to challenge even the definition of antisemitism which has historically meant hatred of Jews. Some member states also sought to further manipulate the human rights system by racializing the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. Further, Jewish and Israeli groups were openly discriminated against in the NGO Forum. At this point in time, we cannot say that the lessons of Durban have been learned.

The Preparatory Committee for the Durban Review Conference has scheduled its meetings during days that conflict with two of the most important Jewish holidays - Passover and Yom Kippur - thus limiting the potential participation by Jewish groups. We hope that in its next meeting the bureau will take this into consideration and change the dates to indicate an act of good will and show that the conference can still be directed in a constructive, inclusive way.

We believe that a review conference for Durban should be briefly convened at UN headquarters in New York or Geneva, and should be limited in scope to what was already agreed upon in the Durban Declaration. Having a large conference that would open itself to renegotiations on subjects already negotiated would be a disaster in our eyes. Further any inclusion of religious defamation would be seen by us as a step backward and in the direction of limiting freedom of expression.

Thank you, Mr. President.