

NORWEGIAN STATEMENT

Durban Review Conference, Geneva 20 April 2009

Remarks/address by Jonas Gahr Støre, Minister of Foreign Affairs

Check against delivery.

Mr. President,

This is the rostrum of the United Nations. By definition it is a rostrum for the freedom of speech – crucial among human rights.

The President of Iran has just exercised that human right. He did so – I believe – in a way that threatens the very focus of this conference.

Today we meet on the basis of a declaration that has been carefully negotiated by our representatives. It has managed to build a broad consensus, bringing on board all states and groups of states.

By his intervention the President of Iran chose to place his country outside the margins of this declaration.

Freedom of speech – yes. But the document that we have agreed is also clear on the need to protect against the incitement of hatred. I heard the messages in the President’s speech – and they amount to just that: Incitement of hatred, spreading politics of fear and promoting an indiscriminate message of intolerance.

The declaration that we have agreed is not a finger pointing exercise, it is not listing one conflict after another. Today’s declaration is principled. We know there are many conflicts – too many conflicts – around the world between countries and within countries. The text aims at protecting people and individuals against the scourge of racism, discrimination and incitement to hatred.

The Iranian President’s allegations run counter to the very spirit and dignity of this conference. I will not respond to all the allegations. Through his message the president has made Iran the odd man out. And Norway will not accept that the odd man out hijacks the collective effort of the many.

Again – the President of Iran chose to place Iran as the odd man out.

Mr President,

The point of departure that has brought us to Geneva is our common obligation to fight racism.

This obligation is pressing. Because racism degrades us as human beings. Racial discrimination is a denial of human rights.

With this as our point of departure, it should be easy to agree on a final outcome document from this conference. We know, however, that agreeing on this has been anything but easy. We learned this lesson in Durban eight years ago.

The debates and various manifestations at the NGO forum in 2001 descended into a clamour of conflicting messages and extreme statements. In some circles Durban was remembered more by the outrageousness of some of the statements than by the content of the document that was adopted at the conference.

Let us not forget that the Durban declaration was accepted by near consensus. In my country it served as a point of reference for the elaboration of detailed action plans to combat racism and discrimination.

The run-up to this review conference has not been easy either. A few months ago we had before us a text marred by brackets and conflicting statements – detracting from the vital message we are seeking to convey: namely that racism in all its forms must be fought.

Norway for its part defined five key objectives as we embarked on the final stretch of the preparations:

First, we wanted a strong and unequivocal text against racism. We could not accept the text being taken hostage by a whole array of unrelated issues.

Second, we could not accept a text that called for restrictions on the defamation of religions. Human rights obligations protect individuals, not religions. It is within the scope of freedom of expression to criticise both gods and religions.

Third, we could not accept a text that would infringe on freedom of expression as defined in Articles 19 and 20 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. Without freedom of expression, we cannot fight racism or human rights violations. In short; we cannot compromise on the hard-won gains made in the field of universal human rights.

Fourth, we wanted a text that recognises the role of the free media in fighting racism, while recalling that the media also has a responsibility to refrain from inciting to hatred and violence.

Fifth, we wanted a text of universal scope so as to avoid spotlighting the significance of one particular conflict, for instance by singling out the Middle East as a special case in point.

And finally: We could not accept a text that would attempt to rewrite history. Some have attempted to degrade the terrible lessons from Holocaust. That is unacceptable. Holocaust originated in the minds of men. It was not a natural disaster. It was a man-made disaster. This is now reflected in the declaration.

Mr President,

Let me reiterate:

It is Norway's position that the fight against racism and racial discrimination is of the utmost importance.

It is Norway's position that the follow-up conference to Durban should send a strong and comprehensive message to that effect.

And it is Norway's position that this is the purpose of the UN – to bring together the nations of the world, in all their diversity, to reach a consensus – a common platform.

All states – my own included - have their red lines, lines that they cannot accept being crossed.

Now we have reached the end station. We have a text. We read that text as a strong message on racism and racial discrimination. That text is well within our red lines. Thus, Norway is ready to accept the text as it stands. Exaggeration, diversion and extreme statements from this floor can not change that fact.

I congratulate the delegates who have worked so hard to achieve this balanced result, in particular the Russian Chair of the Intersessional Working Group, Yuri Boichenko, and of course the High Commissioner for Human Rights for her tireless efforts in preparing this conference. And I salute all those who worked in good faith to reach consensus, all those who were ready to compromise on details to reach a greater good.

Mr President,

Let me end by broadening the perspective:

Fighting racism is one of the contemporary struggles confronting humanity. There are many more such struggles, ranging from negotiations on disarmament and non-proliferation to

negotiations on combating climate change and the whole array of issues related to the fight against poverty.

The method available to us to advance on these critical issues is to come together and seek common ground. Again, this is why we have the United Nations: to host and promote such efforts. If our goal is to reach global agreement on global challenges – and we are constantly reiterating that this is crucial – then we need to continue to invest in the multilateral path.

Our method must be principled dialogue. The alternative is monologue. That takes us nowhere.

We owe it to our constituencies to engage actively and to make every effort to succeed, and we need to do so in good faith. The text as it was agreed last week is a result of a process conducted in good faith.

Against this background I regret that some states decided at the last minute to withdraw. I urge all participating states to stand by this laudable result. I agree with those who see it as an accomplishment for all those who are aiming to build a world free of all forms of discrimination.

Mr President,

I decided to attend this conference to convey Norway's views. We who have made a point of defending freedom of expression cannot opt for non-attendance as a strategy, leaving the floor to precisely those who hold opposite views. We will not surrender the floor of the United Nations to the extremists.

Let us not forget that a conference alone will not solve the problems of racism and discrimination in our societies. These issues are too complex to resolve in a single action plan or conference. They concern how we behave and interrelate as human beings. We need to follow up the outcome document and use it as a common point of reference and source of inspiration.

If that can be achieved, then the Durban II Conference will stand the test of history.