

World Conference Against Racism: A People's Victory

by Samir Amin

The significance of the World Conference Against Racism lies in the new prospects that it has opened. A breath of revival was clearly palpable in Durban arising from the solidarity of the Afro-Asian peoples attending. In fact, a renewal of this solidarity is one of the essential, or rather fundamental, conditions for building a more equitable form of globalization than the present system, which the G-7, led by its North American boss, wants to impose on the peoples of the planet by every means possible including extreme violence.

During the 1990s, the United Nations initiated a series of global conferences addressing some of the major problems of our time (poverty, population, children, women, and the environment, among others.) It also introduced a new way of holding conferences at two levels simultaneously: official meetings at the government level and, at the same time, meetings of delegates from "civil society." The dominant establishment, namely the United States, working through the World Bank (in its role as a kind of Ministry of Propaganda for the G-7) and through the UN bureaucracy, effectively controlled the statements of this "civil society." With financial inducements and by manipulating a majority of NGOs—so naïve, to put it mildly, as to subscribe to the dominant system's motions—they were able to void the impact of the demands and declarations of the peoples the NGOs were supposed to have represented.

The Durban conference—the last in the cycle—had been concocted on the same pattern that had worked for the United States in the past. Protests against "racism" and all forms of "discrimination" had been worded so as to make them meaningless: governments and NGOs

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attending the conference were invited to confess their sins in chorus and express regrets about the surviving "vestiges" of discrimination against "indigenous peoples," "non-Caucasian races" (to use the official parlance of the United States), women and "sexual minorities." The recommendations that had been prepared in advance were painless and based on the North American faith in legalism, that is, that problems can be solved through legislation. The underlying causes of the major forms of discrimination, direct results of the social and international inequality produced by the logic of globalized liberal capitalism, were left out of the original draft.

But at Durban the massive number of participating African and Asian organizations, bent on asking the real questions, stood in the way of this strategy of Washington and its cronies. Racism and discrimination in all their forms are not synonymous with the sum of criminal behaviors suffered by the hapless victims of "extreme" prejudice who, regrettably, continue to be found in large numbers and in every society across the planet. Racism and discrimination are generated, produced and reproduced by the logic and expansion of capitalism as we know it, especially in its so-called liberal form. The kind of globalization imposed by dominant capitalism and its henchmen (with the governments of the Triad in the lead) can only result in "apartheid on a global scale."

Having sensed danger during the heated discussions of the preliminary committee, the governments of the G-7 had decided in advance to boycott the conference and declare its "failure." The African and Asian delegates held out. According to plan, they forced discussion of the two topics that Western diplomats did not want to broach.

First was the subject of "reparations" for the devastation caused by the slave trade. I use quotation marks because the papers that were presented brought out into the open the depth of the chasm dividing the two sides. U.S. and European diplomats labored strenuously to undermine the issue, reducing it, with condescension and a touch of contempt, to a question of the "amount" that these "professional beggars" were claiming in damages. That is not how the African delegates saw it. They did not see it as a matter of "cash" but rather of acknowledging that colonialism, imperialism, and the slavery that they entailed, were largely responsible for racism and the "underdevelopment" of Africa in particular. These were the motions that made the representatives of the Western powers explode.

Second was the subject of Israel. Both African and Asian delegates were clear and precise on this point, namely, that the continuing colo-

nization by Israel of the Occupied Territories, the eviction of Palestinians in favor of Israeli settlers (in effect nothing other than "ethnic cleansing"), and the planned "bantustanization" of Palestine (Israel here applying down to the last details the methods of South Africa's former apartheid), all simply make up the final chapter in a long history of imperialism which is "racist" by definition.

By withdrawing from the conference with its faithful ally Israel, the United States openly declared its intent to sabotage the proceedings. The Europeans stayed on though, represented from lower echelons of government and, as we know, exerted every pressure within their means to corrupt the most vulnerable delegates. ("How much?" was one of the ways, as reported by several of those who were contacted in this regard.)

These efforts were not without success at the official level of the conference and the resolutions adopted by majority vote toned down considerably the original motions which had been introduced by the African and Asian organizations. However, the fact remains—and this is where the Durban conference was a success—that the African and Asian governments had been mindful of what clearly were the prevailing views of their own people who now were provoked even more by the arrogance of the diplomats of the West.

The spirit of Bandung has breathed again. The 1955 Bandung conference, which saw the birth of Afro-Asian solidarity and of the Non-Aligned Movement (non-aligned on liberal globalization these days), set in motion a first round of national liberation movements which primed the world for coming changes. Whatever the limitations of the systems arising from this first phase of independence from imperialism, and whatever the illusions they may have inspired (not unusual in history), it was their decline which made possible dominant capital's counteroffensive and the deployment of a new imperialist globalization. Before our eyes a new wave is building of a farther reaching liberation. Durban has been one of its precursors. We shall no doubt see others in future.

Because Durban constituted a people's victory, the whole G-7 propaganda machinery has been put to work to disparage its significance. It is very disappointing that the dominant media have simply parroted whatever the U.S. and Israeli governments have adopted as their official lines in their area. At best there have been "reports" by journalists who were not present at the Durban conference, but there also have been outright lies. The truth is that none of the texts coming out of the conference can be in any way be termed "anti-Semitic." It is high time

to stop giving in to this kind of blackmail which has been paralyzing any criticism, however relevant, of Israel.

With Seattle, Nice, Gothenburg, Genoa, and Porto Alegre, Durban has been one of a chain of encouraging developments at this time. Now is the moment for all those who justly condemn dominant capital's neo-liberal globalization strategy to understand that theirs is a common struggle and that the struggle of the peoples of the South against imperialism and the hegemony of the United States is no less important than the fight for justice by the underprivileged within the developed capitalist states themselves. In the aftermath of the attacks on the symbolic targets of New York's financial center and the Pentagon, we must realize that there can be no united front against terrorism without a united front against international and social injustice.



Why Terrorist Attacks?

As part of its global power position, the United States is called upon frequently to respond to international causes and deploy forces around the world. America's position in the world invites attack simply because of its presence. *Historical data show a strong correlation between U.S. involvement in international situations and an increase in terrorist attacks against the United States* (emphasis added).

—U.S. Department of Defense, Defense Science Board, *The Defense Science Board 1997 Summer Study Task Force on DOD Responses to Transnational Threats*, October 1997, Final Report, Vol. 1, p. 15.