

Address at the Opening of the World Conference Against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance

Durban, 31 August 2001

Your Excellency, Secretary General of the United Nations, Mr Kofi Annan,
Your Excellencies Heads of State and Government, Ministers and Heads of Delegation,
Esteemed leaders of the non-governmental organisations,
President of the World Conference, the Hon Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma,
Secretary General of the World Conference, the Hon Mary Robinson,
Distinguished delegates and guests,
Members of the mass media,
Friends, ladies and gentlemen:

On behalf of the people of South Africa and our government, I am privileged to join in welcoming you all to South Africa and to this historic world conference that has the potential and a responsibility to convey a message of hope to billions of people across the globe.

We have gathered as we have, because we are united in our resolve to ensure that every human being leads a life of dignity. We meet here because we are determined to ensure that nobody anywhere should be subjected to the insult and offence of being despised by another or others because of his or her race, colour, nationality or origin.

Together we are committed to the realisation of the objective that every human being should enjoy human rights as equals with other human beings, with every right and possibility to determine both their future and the destiny of their countries.

This surely means that nobody should be denied their statehood on any basis whatsoever, or turned into permanent refugees with neither the right nor the possibility to build a national home they can truly call home.

I am certain we are determined to speak with one voice to assert that no culture, language or tradition of any people is inferior, deserving of being despised, mocked and destroyed. By this means we want to make the point firmly that all peoples and all nations are mutually and each equally entitled to their identity and their national pride.

We have gathered in Durban because we have understood that poverty is not a natural human condition. Accordingly, it constitutes a direct attack on the human dignity of all those condemned to deprivation and are therefore forced to beg, to steal, to prostitute themselves because they are poor or those who resort to substance abuse to take away the pain of hunger and despair.

Understanding all this, we are meeting here because we have said to ourselves that since poverty is not an act of nature but the product of human society, we must as this human society, together fight and vanquish poverty and underdevelopment.

We have come together, in what some believe is a new age of reason, because we know that the knowledge and the means exist in human society today in fact to overcome this poverty and underdevelopment.

The question that remains to be answered is what is to be done to deploy these powerful intellectual and material resources so that poverty everywhere becomes a thing of the past.

It became necessary that we convene in Durban because, together, we recognised the fact there are many in our common world who suffer indignity and humiliation because they are not white.

Their cultures and traditions are despised as savage and primitive and their identities denied. They are not white and are deeply immersed in poverty. Of them it is said that they are human but black, whereas others are described as human and white.

To those who have to bear the pain of this real world, it seems the blues singers were right when they decried the world in which it was said - if you're white you're alright; if you are brown, stick around; if you are black, oh brother! get back, get back, get back!

Your
Distinguished delegates:

Excellencies,

I speak in these terms, which some may think are too harsh and stark, because I come from a people that have known the bitter experience of slavery, colonialism and racism.

These are a people who know what it means to be the victim of rabid racism and racial discrimination. Among us are the women who suffered most because they had to carry the additional burden of gender oppression and discrimination.

Because of that experience, against whose results we continue to struggle to this day, as we will do for a considerable time to come, we also know what can be achieved when the peoples of the world unite to say no longer will they allow that another human being will suffer at the hands of another because of their race, colour, nationality and origin.

In welcoming you to South Africa, we welcome you as fellow combatants who joined us in struggle to defeat and suppress the apartheid crime against humanity.

Accordingly, I am privileged to have the opportunity as you, who represent the nations of the world, meet in this country, which not so long ago was the fountainhead of racism, once more to convey to you the immense gratitude of the millions of our people that you did not stand aside when that crime against humanity was being committed.

These masses are convinced that when you waged that protracted struggle, you did so because you were opposed to racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance everywhere.

They welcomed the fact that you decided to convene this World Conference here in the belief that you did so because you have confidence that we too remain an active part of the world movement determined to fight on until racism ceases to define anybody's place in society and the world.

They were happy that you would come, because this would give us an opportunity to reaffirm in front of you all that to us slavery, colonialism and racism are fundamentally repugnant.

It would give us the possibility to pledge to the peoples of the world that we will not betray the friendship and solidarity which drove you to act against apartheid and will therefore join with you in the difficult struggle to eradicate the legacy of slavery, colonialism and racism.

Those on our common universe, who are defined by the blues singers as brown and black, expect much of this important World Conference. They believe that something will come out of here that will signify a united and sustained global drive within their countries and throughout the world to help rid them of the suffering they bear because they are brown and black.

They entertain this hope because their suffering is real and immense. And yet they can also see that there are others who are as human as they, who lead decent lives and are certain of even better lives in future, whatever other problems they experience.

Gripped by poverty, fearful of the future because they know that tomorrow will be worse than today, forced to behave towards others as though some are inferior and others superior, simply to get something to eat, many take to their feet to flee from their lands of despair, at all costs trying to reach other countries they believe have the possibility to introduce them to a life of hope.

Our common humanity dictates that as we rose against apartheid racism, so must we combine to defeat the consequences of slavery, colonialism and racism which, to this day, continue to define the lives of billions of people who are brown and black, as lives of hopelessness.

Nobody ever chose to be a slave, to be colonised, to be racially oppressed. The impulses of the time caused these crimes to be committed by human beings against others.

Surely, the impulse of our own time says to all of us that we must do everything we can to free those who to this day suffer from racism, xenophobia and related intolerance because their forebears were enslaved, colonised and racially oppressed.

It surely must be that this World Conference will say that, in all countries, both of the North and the South, the brown and black ghettos of poverty, despair and human degradation must no longer exist.

This World Conference will have to indicate what is to be done practically so that this call results in a changed and changing world in which all human beings actually enjoy the inalienable right to human dignity.

An important part of our legitimacy as governments derives from our commitment to serve the people. Our own experience tells us that these people whom we serve always feel pain when another, who might be a citizen of other lands, feels pain.

To these masses, human solidarity is not a foreign concept. To them, this World Conference must convey the message that the peoples of the world are inspired by a new internationalism that says that we are determined to unite in action to repair the gross human damage that was caused in the past.

It must inspire them with the knowledge that as governments, as non-governmental organisations, as countries and as peoples, we are ready now, to dedicate our minds, our skills and our resources to the creation of a new world free of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance.

It must convey a message of hope to the peoples of the world that, together, we are resolved to work hard for peace everywhere on our universe, so that the doors open everywhere for the fullest and all-round development of all human beings in conditions of freedom, safety and security.

The Middle East cries out for a just, stable and permanent peace that is long overdue. The people of Palestine, like those of Israel and everywhere else in the world, are also entitled to pursue their fullest and all-round development in conditions of freedom, safety and security.

Our own Continent of Africa also deserves peace like any other, to rescue the peoples from death and destruction and to open the doors for us too, to develop in conditions of freedom, safety and security.

Thus will the conditions be created for us as Africans to take to the long road towards the eradication of the legacy, which is our daily companion, of slavery, colonialism and racism.

Only recently we bade farewell to a century that has visited terrible suffering to millions of people. It inflicted a terrible Holocaust on the Jewish people. It imposed a frightful genocide on the people of Rwanda. It produced criminal regimes of people demented by adherence to anti-human ideologies of racial superiority.

And yet this same century gave us a global compact in the form of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. It gave humanity as a whole the possibility to accumulate the knowledge and the means to realise the noble vision contained in that document.

We have gathered in Durban to make the commitment that this we will do and, together, to decide what steps we will take to ensure what has to be done, is done.

Once more, I welcome you to this country which you helped to liberate from apartheid racism and hope that the celebration of that victory will give this World Conference the inspiration to produce the results that will define the 21st century as the century that restored to all, their human dignity.

Thank you.