

Durban 2009: will the NGOs join Canada?

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As the first country to pull-out of the United Nations' planned 2009 Durban Review Conference, Canada has re-established its leadership in the field of human rights.

Ministers Maxime Bernier and Jason Kenney have boldly declared that the 2001 UN-sponsored World Conference Against Racism (WCAR) "degenerated into open and divisive expressions of intolerance and anti-Semitism that undermined the principles of the United Nations." And the backing provided by both the Liberals and NDP shows that there's broad national support for their position.

This statement provided moral clarity, as well as belated recognition of the mistakes made in 2001, when Canada naively funded many of the participants in the NGO (non-governmental organization) forum at Durban. More than 4000 "delegates" adopted a declaration accusing Israel of "apartheid" and perpetrating a "holocaust." To prevent a repetition, Canada has pledged that any funding that it provides to NGOs can't be used to help them take part in the second Durban conference in 2009.

Following Canada's lead, French President Nicolas Sarkozy also declared that his government would stay away if the 2009 conference was likely to repeat the hatred of 2001. Other European governments are expected to follow, and U.S. officials have made similar statements, although they stopped short of a formal withdrawal. Israel – which pulled its delegation from the 2001 meeting – predictably announced that it would boycott a conference that promoted anti-Semitism.

In contrast, the silence – and in some cases active complicity of the NGO community – has been disturbing. Predictably, pro-Palestinian groups such as the Canadian Arab Federation attacked the decision for Canada not to participate, absurdly claiming that denunciation of anti-Semitism was a blow to "tolerance and multiculturalism in Canada."

Officials of wealthy and powerful groups such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, which claim to support universal human rights, are hiding behind vague formulations. Both organizations were active in the 2001 forum and failed to speak out against this travesty, and they've been active promoting the Durban strategy of boycotts, divestment and sanctions. Their recent statements condemned Israeli attempts to end the rocket attacks from Gaza, with false accusations of "collective punishment" and "war crimes."

And the leaders of the radical Montreal-based group Alternatives, which is funded by the Canadian International Development Agency, absurdly said in a press release that

“Canada should ask Israel to pay for damages caused by its army,” immorally promoting the Palestinian strategy of terror.

Amnesty and HRW have also abstained from adding their names to a mild statement written by the Magenta group in Holland and the Jacob Blaustein Institute. More than 20 groups, including Human Rights First and Rabbis for Human Rights, declared that the 2001 conference included “violations of procedure in the preparatory and drafting processes... racist treatment including violence, exclusion and intimidation against Jewish participants, and the misuse of human rights terminology... With a few notable exceptions, the vast majority of groups was silent or refused to speak out.”

The signatories pledged to reject hatred and incitement in all its forms, including anti-Semitism, to learn from the shortcomings of the 2001 WCAR, and to work together in a spirit of mutual respect. The members of the Canadian branches of Amnesty International and the donors to Human Rights Watch should demand that the heads of their organizations adopt this pledge.

They can point to the Ford Foundation, whose funds were also used by many anti-Israel NGOs to participate in Durban 2001, but which has since adopted a policy like Canada’s to prevent a repetition in 2009. While some gaps in implementation have been uncovered by NGO Monitor (of which I am the Executive Director), Ford officials have said that they will examine each case. In contrast, the New Israel Fund has yet to adopt a position, which is disturbing, particularly for a group whose members are strong Zionists. The NIF has received \$40 million (US) from the Ford Foundation in recent years, of which a considerable amount goes to radical Arab groups such as Adalah, which also played a major role in the NGO forum in 2001.

Adalah and other recipients of NIF “civil rights” donations are at the forefront of the anti-Israel delegitimization campaigns, often using terms such as “apartheid” and “racist” in documents submitted to UN groups. An NIF pledge to prevent its funds from being used for the 2009 Durban Review Conference would be of particular importance in preventing a rerun.