

UNITED NATIONS ASSOCIATION

--WESTMINSTER--

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Whatever happened to the UN Conference on racism?

Report of meeting held on 12 December 2001

David Wardrop, Chairman, Westminster UNA, welcomed branch members and friends to the meeting. He reported that speakers from both the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights and the Runnymede Trust were unable to join the meeting and therefore, he proposed to use recent publications and reports to chronicle events since the World Conference on Racism (WCAR).

He stated that the UK government had appeared lukewarm in its approach to WCAR, to a degree with good reason. However, UNA has been critical of the approach by our government to several UN initiatives, especially the *International Year for Tolerance* (1995) and the *International Year for the Culture of Peace* (2000). Expectations on the outcome of WCAR were not high and the reports on it are a matter of record. But whose record, he asked? He referred to the Forum held on 6 December at the UN titled "*News vs Propaganda*" [www.un.org/News/Press/docs2001/hr4576.doc.htm] which showed how different parties had reported its conduct and outcome. He would refer to this later.

Two major issues, the Middle East and claims for reparations to Africans for the slave trade nearly derailed WCAR; myriad other issues including the plight of the Amerindians, the Dalits and the Romanies which ran high-profile campaigns in Durban. Generally, such issues were taken by various governments as threats and they made strenuous efforts to keep these issues off the intergovernmental agenda. At the UN-hosted Forum mentioned earlier, Mary Robinson had conceded that the WCAR was portrayed by the media as well-intentioned but ultimately flawed. She rebutted this portrayal, urging her critics to move ahead. But how has the momentum been lost? The WCAR should by now have led to the publication of two documents, the *Declaration* and the *Programme of Action*. However, disagreement between European governments who seek to locate the slavery reparations issue in the *Declaration* and African governments who seek to locate it in the *Programme of Action* has led to deadlock. Whilst this continues, governments will not convene domestic NGOs and other national actors to devise new racism strategies.

A further snag to progress related to the events of 11 September and the urgency shown by some governments, including the UK, to enact anti-terrorism legislation as quickly as possible. This urgency is in part driven by UN Security Council Resolution 1373 which requires governments to report before 27 December on their progress in introducing such measures.

So how do we regain that lost momentum? Who are our willing allies? Who are those who should be there, working with us in addressing these issues? Mr Wardrop returned to the recent forum held in New York on 10 December. Participants alongside Mary Robinson included Lakhtar Brahimi and representatives from CNN, BBC, the *New York Times*, *Al-Jazeera* and *Al Ouds Al-Arabi*. All were outspoken in their assessment of the treatment the others had given to WCAR and the events following Sept 11. The US media was severely attacked for its association with the US government's action. Mrs Robinson observed that WCAR was seen by some western commentators as part of an ongoing plot to attack the West and especially Israel. *Al-Jazeera* considered the western media decidedly biased and asked why should the Middle East not be discussed at WCAR? It claimed that

Washington and London, through their control of so much of the media, had controlled the output. "Where was the independence of the media?" Even the South African hosts were accused of trying to sweep contentious issues under the carpet for the better presentation and delivery of the conference outcome. The events of 11 September and their impact on the media were raised too. Arab journalists on the panel referred to proposed legislation in the US and the UK, positing the point that, during the IRA bombing, the UK government never 'trawled the bars of Kilburn demanding that resident Irish stated their loyalty to the Queen'.

Mr Wardrop then drew the audience's attention to the unprecedented initiative by the 17 Human Rights rapporteurs titled *Independent experts remind states of obligations to uphold fundamental freedoms* www.unhchr.ch/hurricane/hurricane.nst/view01/B6A4C75366A3B305C1256B1E0037F9B1 He noted also the published poll in the *New York Times* (12 December) which indicated that while the US public supported their president's conduct of the war, they had misgivings about the erosion of civil liberties resulting from proposed legislation.

So what has actually happened since WCAR? Firstly, an anti-discrimination unit has been set up within the UNHCHR, comprising five people (see *WCAR Newsletter*, October, page 6 www.unhchr.ch/pdf/wcrnewsletter6_en.pdf) Secondly, the holding of the *International Consultative Conference on School Education in relation with Freedom of Religion and Belief, Tolerance and Non-discrimination* in Madrid, 23-25 November (www.unhchr.ch/html/menu2/7/b/main.htm for summary of recommendations). In the UK, we believe that the Home Office will convene NGOs in February, maybe later. This represents an unconscionable delay since WCAR.

Mr Wardrop then introduced the *12 Point Plan*, serving as a discussion document. He stated that he had put this together using the *WCAR Declaration* and *Programme of Action*, as yet unpublished. By combining the thrusts of these two documents which total 70+ pages, we would not be constricted by the slavery issue as have been governments. He stated that the wording of the document followed closely that of the original documents and he hoped that, by reducing the Plan to two pages, the audience would not feel short-changed.

General debate followed. Greenwich Community Relations Council provided information of its tripartite (council/police/community) initiative enabling each sector to understand better the 'culture' of the other; its *All different, all equal* programme aimed at under-achieving sectors of the community, being piloted in Woolwich; and its successful touring exhibition *The Making of Britain*, featuring the contributions made to our society by those from immigrant communities. The plight of the Romanies was introduced, chronicling how they had been treated in eastern Europe at best as second-class citizens, sometimes as slaves. It was suggested that they could consider mounting an exhibition similar to the Greenwich model.

The Citizenship programmes for young people run by the Ba'hais were praised but many present felt that such initiatives should be taken by government more forcefully, rather than left to head-teachers to put together. Also, whilst in central London where population densities demand a degree of tolerance from all citizens, this formula won't work necessarily in the suburbs, even some London boroughs. Homeless people, too, have opinions, it was noted and they tend to be those most pressurised by bureaucratic demands. The unsettled issue of slavery was raised and, although the European governments did in fact 'apologise' for their part in the slave trade, many in Africa and the African diaspora felt that more should be done to atone for these acts.

The meeting closed with agreement that we should keep abreast of developments, ensuring that the international dimension of the racism issue be vigorously promoted should the Cattle Report on the riots on northern towns in the summer be discussed in parliament or in other fora.