

*** COMBATING RACISM

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Statement to the fortieth session of the United Nations Sub-Commission on
Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities
Agenda item 5(a): Measures to combat racism and racial discrimination and the
role of the Sub-Commission

Geneva, Switzerland
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Nineteen eighty-eight is a year of anniversaries. Forty years ago, the nations of the world promulgated a code of human rights, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, that shines as a beacon of hope to millions of human beings languishing under the yoke of racism, religious intolerance, and other forms of oppression inflicted by one group against another. Twenty-five years ago, the United Nations adopted the Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, spelling out in great detail the various elements of the right to freedom from racial discrimination. Finally, five years ago, the UN General Assembly proclaimed the Second Decade to Combat Racial Discrimination. Today, in 1988, we stand at the midpoint of the Second Decade.

A year of such significant anniversaries presents an auspicious opportunity to take stock of our achievements and our failures in effacing the blot of racism from human affairs. We applaud the Sub-Commission and its Special Rapporteur, Mr. Eide, for their efforts to appraise soberly the successes and disappointments of the First Decade to Combat Racism and Racial Discrimination as well as of the first half of the Second Decade, with an eye to identifying more effective strategies for the second half of the Second Decade. In this spirit of critical assessment, the Baha'i International Community would like to present a number of thoughts about the nature of the problem at hand and effective actions that can now be taken to tackle it.

At least one obvious conclusion leaps from the pages of Mr. Eide's fine report: racism is a stubborn foe, a social malady with roots that run deep in the soil of human history and in the collective human conscience. In the Baha'i view, racism is tenacious because it is not confined to its more apparent manifestations of political oppression and strife, such as we witness today in Africa, or economic inequality and exploitation. Rather, racism is enduring because it first takes root in the minds and consciences of individuals. It involves learned behavior, the expression of racial prejudice in individual hearts.

Accordingly, any campaign to eradicate racism must be concerned vitally with

endeavors to change beliefs and attitudes. Political action alone cannot offer a permanent solution. In the absence of a change in human attitudes, and the development, among ordinary people and their leaders, of a firm conviction in the truth of racial equality, political advances can easily be reversed by those individuals and groups continuing to harbor racial animosities.

How can these racial prejudices be abolished? Fueled by a complex array of societal pressures, racial hatred are the fruits of ignorance, of stereotypic misconceptions, of the human tendency to elevate one's group to a position of superiority over others and of the absence of spiritual values. In the Baha'i view, the blatantly false and misguided premises upon which racism rests must be countered by the truth: that all human beings belong to a single human family, the human race, a family united biologically, socially, and spiritually, while displaying, to the enrichment of the entire planet a limitless variety of secondary physical characteristics. If every person is led to perceive this truth and to welcome those of another skin color as members of his own spiritual family, racism will find a receptive home nowhere and will evaporate of its own accord. It is therefore essential to educate every individual, but especially young children, in the truth of the unity of the human race, a truth confirmed by all the human sciences.

At the same time, our analysis of the problem of racism leads to the conclusion that the United Nations has a vital role to play in its elimination. Racism is a global disease, infecting human hearts in every country of the world. The United Nations can do much to inspire and guide the global effort that is required to eradicate it. For this reason we welcome the holding this year of a global consultation on racial discrimination.

In addition, for reasons already indicated, we believe that global consultation, and United Nations activities in general, should focus on education in the truth of human unity and racial equality. The United Nations is in a position to act as the facilitator of an international educational campaign, involving national and local governments, as well as non-governmental organizations. With the proclamation of the Second Decade, the United Nations has taken the first step towards the implementation of such a campaign, and we applaud the various informational activities that it has already undertaken in this connection. Furthermore, we welcome the General Assembly's renewed invitation to UNESCO, in GA resolution 42/47, to expedite the preparation of teaching materials on racism and racial discrimination, with particular emphasis on activities at the primary and secondary levels.

We warmly applaud all the efforts that have already been made in connection with the Second Decade. We believe, however, that a more sustained, far-reaching educational campaign is called for.

First, while the United Nations can facilitate such an effort, we are convinced that such a campaign must be launched and pursued from the grass-root level, in order to reach the hearts and minds of ordinary people. Organizations and governments must take the initiative and determine what they can do to foster a

more universal awareness of racial unity and equality. As part of their contribution to the required global effort, Baha'i communities in over 100 countries are training young children in the principle of racial unity, in organized classes and special conferences, as well as in the home.

Second, Baha'is believe that in order to change attitudes, it is not enough to present objective information about the problem of racism. In consonance with the view that educational programmes must emphasize the fundamental bonds that unite people of all racial backgrounds, we have advocated the development of a model universal curriculum on the oneness of mankind in previous statements to the Sub-Commission. Further, we have expressed the view that UNESCO would be the most appropriate agency to outline such a curriculum, in light of the many materials it has already produced in the field of human rights education, as well as its access to the latest scientific findings testifying to the biological, psychological and social unity of the human species. Such a suggested curriculum could then be disseminated to governments and non-governmental organizations and adapted by them for use in their educational efforts.

For all these reasons, the Baha'i International Community would like to recommend that the forthcoming global consultation on racism devote appropriate time to considering how to encourage a worldwide educational campaign and to develop and disseminate a model curriculum on the oneness of mankind. We also welcome the approval by the General Assembly of the holding, during the biennium 1992-93, of a round-table of experts to discuss the preparation of teaching materials to combat racism and racial discrimination. We hope that this round-table will also discuss means for facilitating educational programmes designed to instill in young children a heart-felt consciousness of the unity of humankind and to suggest the elements for a model curriculum in this area. The Baha'i International Community, based on its long experience in promoting racial harmony and equality, would be happy to offer its assistance in this endeavour, in whatever way it can.

Since the founding of the Baha'i Faith in 1844, Baha'is around the world have been staunchly committed to the goal of eliminating prejudice and fostering racial unity. We have witnessed the positive, unifying results of those efforts in our own communities. Because of our experience in this field, we recognize that the road to the elimination of racial discrimination is long and rocky. But we are equally optimistic that humankind will, with the necessary resolve, reach the ultimate destination of racial unity and understanding. If individuals, non-governmental organizations, and governments can resolve to educate themselves, their communities and their children in the truth of human unity, we may well be able to look back upon the Second Decade as a turning point in the struggle against racism.

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