The Legacy of Racism

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Statement of Prof. Rajiva Wijesinha, Secretary General of the Sri Lankan Peace Secretariat, during the General Debate at the Durban Review Conference in Geneva, April 23rd 2009 Mr. President, Sri Lanka congratulates you and those who worked so hard to develop this process of discussion and analysis, since we are clearly dealing here with a continuing problem for the world. I will not use the term international community, for that too has become a victim of racism, inasmuch as it is used to define a rag tag and bobtail of a few countries, the non-governmental organizations they fund and the press that privileges them.

Indeed the reactions to what might be termed the keynote speech of this Conference, the address of His Excellency the Iranian President, exemplifies this blinkered view. What some might have described as petulance was characterized elsewhere as chaos, and in the process we lost sight of some significant conceptual insights. As with any such address, there were points some would agree with and others not, but the important thing is to remain engaged, and build on what is useful. In this context the world needed to note the President’s remarks on the world order that had been imposed following the two World Wars, impositions that today would be seen as racist but then passed muster because the view that winners take all was then endemic. So we had the horrors of Hiroshima, just as a quarter of a century previously we had had the viciousness of Versailles, which soon enough gave birth to the greater horror of Nazism. Our honourable Minister, Douglas Devananda, highlighted in his opening address the racism that can develop as a reaction, when victims become perpetrators, and the last century saw enough examples of that. But there is another phenomenon that we must also note, namely a sense of guilt that is over-riding, and therefore takes no account of ordinary morality in its desire to compensate. That was one of the points the Iranian President made, in drawing attention to the racism that marked Europe during the Second World War. Far from denying it, he was pointing out that the new imposed world order sprang from that racism, but in turn created more suffering for others of different races. It was no coincidence that the most extreme reactions in Europe to not just his address but the lead up to it came from those countries with the worst records of racism during the Second World War. The address therefore should have prompted self examination, reflections on what Conrad described as the Heart of Darkness that characterized the colonial period, one in which people took away lands and property from others simply because their noses were a mite shorter. That precisely is what happened after the war, and the suffering that was engendered then has affected the world since. So we have wonderful theories with essentially racist bases, about the clash of civilizations and cultures when, using Occam’s Razor, we could deduce that this is all about deprivation, forced deprivation. Where compensation should have been made by the perpetrators of racism and genocide, the burden was transferred, and in time the guilt too. And this whole world order is guided, Mr. President, by a dispensation that still privileges the victors. The need for Security Council Reform is paramount, if we are not to continue to suffer from the original viciousness that characterized those Great White Wars. I cannot speak obviously for Africa and South America, which have also suffered deprivation, but clearly the present structure that limits Asian representation is grossly unfair, in terms of the people represented and the financial contribution to the world at large. Whilst we are immensely grateful to those countries on the Security Council that represent an alternative viewpoint, and will not be bludgeoned into acquiescence in the adventurism that the so-called international community advocates, the vilification that has followed this – to be proved wrong subsequently – is ample argument in itself for change. The United Nations, Mr. President, insofar as its Security Council is structured, seems stuck in the mindset of the Wittgensteinian individual who bought a second copy of the morning paper to prove that what the first said was true. That uniformity was amply demonstrated by the petulant performance on Monday, when the rest of the world had a very different approach. We have suffered from it recently ourselves, when we heard strictures on Sri Lanka from a standpoint that was outrageously patronizing, if not overtly racist. We have been told for instance that ‘the Sri Lankan government knows that the entire world is very disappointed that in its efforts to end what it sees as 25 years of conflict, it is causing such untold suffering’. The entire world, Mr. President? We are causing untold suffering, not the terrorists who held over 100,000 of our people hostage? Then we are told that there might be independent humanitarian interventions, which is the sort of claim that gives heart to terrorists. Brought up on old Western films, they are led to believe that all problems will be solved by the Great White Queen, Victoria or Marie Antoinette, coming up over the horizon, carrying cucumber sandwiches and cake. And so the terrorists believe that, if they hold onto the hostages for just a short while more, the Security Council as now constituted will ensure their survival. We need Mr. President to move beyond the legacy of the World Wars if the world is not to have to live with racist hierarchies. I hope therefore that this Conference too will add its voice to the plea for reform of the Security Council in the interests of balance and informed consensus, in a rejection of racism and xenophobia in their more subtle if historically determined manifestations. Prof. Rajiva Wijesinha Secretary GeneralSecretariat for Coordinating the Peace Process(SCOPP)