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DURBAN REVIEW CONFERENCE

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Written statement submitted by the Europe – Third World Centre (CETIM), a non-governmental organization in general consultative status and the Third World Forum¹, a non-governmental organization that were accredited to the World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance in Durban (South Africa, in 2001)

WHY DO THE NATO POWERS CONSIDER DURBAN I TO HAVE BEEN A FAILURE AND FEAR A SIMILAR OUTCOME FOR DURBAN II?

1. The choice of title for this paper is deliberate. For the last twenty years or so the Western Powers which make up the NATO alliance have arrogantly set themselves up as representatives of the “International Community” and in so doing have even marginalized the United Nations, the only institution truly qualified to perform this role. This attitude has now become systematic, and at all international conferences the NATO powers regularly band together, often in concerted opposition to the other countries - “the rest of the world”!

It is no accident that the group of nations concerned has chosen a military alliance as a means of representing their common interests. It is an accurate reflection of a collective strategy. A strategy through which this new brand of imperialism, that could be called “collective imperialism”², expresses its aims. Today’s world is divided between the dominant powers and those countries they dominate. The former, to retain their position, must have exclusive access to the natural resources of the whole planet, and military control by the armed forces of the US and their subordinates within NATO has become the necessary means of achieving this.

2. Obviously, the real objectives of the new ‘collective imperialism’ cannot be openly acknowledged. In order to mask them, the powers concerned have decided to use the debate about democracy and human rights to their own advantage. The ‘Triad’ (United States, Europe, Japan) present the world as if it were divided into those countries that are democratic and those that are not. The democracies (the NATO powers) claim “the right to intervene” in order to further the progress of democracy and to uphold human rights, whenever these are flouted by evil dictators. Some even talk about the “duty to intervene”.

3. The United Nations called for a series of large international conferences to examine the pressing issues that we face in the twenty-first century and one of these concerned the problems of “racism, and discrimination in all its forms”. The format of these conferences was an assembly of representatives from member states and alongside, an assembly that was to represent ‘civil society’.

1 Website: <http://www.forumtiersmonde.net/fren/index.php>

2 Samir Amin's expression.

The first of these conferences took place in Durban in September 2001, a few days before the September 11th attacks. A second conference is planned for April 2009, and, although it is to be held in Geneva, it is being referred to as Durban II.

4. Durban I was a double failure for the NATO powers because their scheme was blocked both by the majority of countries from the South at the conference of Member States, and by the NGO Forum. At the main conference, most of the governments of the countries of the South defended the principle of international law that prohibits any unilateral foreign intervention, whatever the pretext. History has taught them the real reasons for these interventions, and the hypocrisy of the discourse on a “civilizing mission”, now branded as “the defense of human rights”. Events that have taken place since Durban I confirm the wisdom of their decision. The United Nations Charter only permits intervention when there is agreement from the Security Council and even then, places severe restrictions on their scope and duration. It has been systematically violated by the NATO powers which have granted themselves the right to decide unilaterally whether to intervene or not. After the invasion of Iraq, on pretexts that we know were completely unfounded, the NATO powers are understandably fearful about another “failure” at Durban II.

The NGO Forum at Durban I was equally strong in its condemnation of foreign interventions in the affairs of countries of the South. In no way did they condone the crimes committed by governments against their own people; nor did they contest the absolute legitimacy of organized campaigns to denounce these crimes, and welcomed the support of people in the North in their shared struggle for democracy. However, the NGO Forum, quite rightly, maintained the distinction between the necessary expression of international solidarity among people and unilateral decisions to intervene taken by governments in the North. This is hardly surprising. The people of the South know from their experience of history that imperialist domination has always been a major obstacle to democracy. They know that the justification used to legitimize intervention – the “defense of democracy” – has only ever been put forward when the proposed intervention served the real objectives of imperialist domination. It is for the people of the South to assume responsibility in their own struggle towards liberation, democracy, and social progress.

Since Durban I, the NATO powers have questioned whether the NGO Forum is “representative”. Certainly this sort of Forum, bringing together a number of organizations with very diverse interests, does need to be looked at critically: it is difficult to come up with the perfect formula to guarantee a “genuine representation” of the people. Nevertheless, the Durban I Forum was certainly as representative as many others, in particular those forums made up of NGO’s that have been hand-picked by certain international institutions such as the World Bank!

The institutionalization of forms of popular representation designed to increase the legitimacy of the United Nations rather than weaken it, would be an objective worth pursuing. Discussion of this question and proposals for action that work towards this objective should be placed on the agenda of social forums and of all progressive democratic organizations.

For the people of the South, Durban I was a success³. It is for this very reason that the NATO powers considered it to be, from their point of view, a failure.

5. The Africans as represented by governments and independent social movements – of which there were many at Durban I - raised the question of the slave trade. The people of Africa reminded the conference that the slave trade, as well as being intrinsically abhorrent, was in large part responsible for the underdevelopment from which the continent still suffers and that the “aid” which it is granted today should really be seen as “reparations”. There is nothing outrageous about this claim.

3 Cf Samir Amin’s article ‘Durban : the World Conference on Racism ‘ in *Monthly Review*, New York, December 2001.

6. The Palestinian question was also on the agenda at Durban I. It would have been scandalous if it were not!

For the people of Asia and of Africa, Israel is quite clearly a colonial project based on the conquest of a foreign territory and on ethnic cleansing. The Israeli settlers, like all colonisers are, by definition, racists.

The fact that a short time ago the countries of the South described Zionism, quite rightly, as racism, and then, for reasons of expediency or under pressure, later retracted this, does not change the general opinion in Asia and Africa, which is instinctively anti-colonial and consequently anti-Zionist. The familiar blackmail in which the Israeli authorities and their Western allies indulge, that disallows condemnation of the State of Israel's actions by dismissing it as 'anti-Semitism', has no effect on opinion in Asia and Africa. After the massacres in Gaza, Israel and her allies fear that opinion at Durban II could be even more severe.

7. The preparations for Durban II currently taking place (this declaration was written in March 2009) have seen diplomatic manoeuvrings designed to give the NATO powers the opportunity to declare the conference a "failure" in advance.

Already the governments of the United States, Canada and Israel, followed by Berlusconi's government in Italy, have decided to boycott the conference. The European nations as a whole are clearly finding it difficult to follow this lead, for fear of alienating opinion in the countries of the South, particularly in Africa and in the Arab world. Therefore, in European diplomatic circles, there is some rather transparent and quite desperate searching around for a pretext that would allow them to follow suit and withdraw from the conference.

And now the perfect excuse has been offered on a plate! The issues at stake at Durban II have been thrown into confusion by an initiative that seeks to condemn 'defamation of religions', which could clearly be a threat to freedom of expression.

There is unfortunately, enormous confusion on this question. It certainly is true that there is an orchestrated campaign against Islam, which does not necessarily worry the NATO powers, given its implication that all Muslims are, at least potentially, terrorists. But while some people hold the view that we have a duty to defend "secularism", tolerance and mutual respect, the fact remains that prohibiting discussion on religious matters is a direct attack on the freedom of expression, which is a fundamental human right. This proposal betrays an archaic, even obscurantist, way of thinking. A curious initiative, that seems to have originated mainly from governments which are faithful allies of Washington! The obscurantist practices of the Gulf States, for example, are generally glossed over by the American authorities. It goes without saying that this obscurantism is not the sole preserve of a few 'Muslims', but is undoubtedly shared by born-again Christians in the United States (including former-President G. Bush Jr.) and by the Catholic Pope who would be happy to see the re-establishment of the crime of blasphemy!

However, the move possibly reveals an interesting convergence between the aims of those governments which claim allegiance to political Islam and those of the NATO countries, looking for excuses to boycott Durban II. Because, if they do attend Durban II, the European governments will have their backs to the wall: how could they possibly dare not to condemn Israeli war crimes in Gaza? Much better for the NATO powers to avoid this question altogether and replace it with a confused, ambiguous and pointless debate about the role of religion in society!

Geneva, 26 March 2009