Change Draft Text or We’ll Boycott Racism Meeting, Netherlands Warns U.N.

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The Netherlands says it will stay away from a United Nations conference on racism scheduled for next spring unless draft documents disproportionately critical of Israel are amended. The announcement is the latest indication that a boycott campaign may slowly be picking up steam.

Canada and Israel already have declared they will stay away; the European Union is considering its position, while Australia and New Zealand have expressed concern.

The Bush administration has been critical and declined to fund the process leading up to the conference, but it stopped short this year of announcing a final decision on participation.

A group of prominent figures is urging President-elect Obama and Secretary of State-designate Hillary Clinton to deny the event legitimacy by announcing that the U.S. will not take part. During her campaign for the Democratic presidential nomination earlier this year, Clinton said she would support a boycott if efforts “to ensure anti-semitism is kept off the agenda at Durban II” fail.

Dutch Foreign Minister Maxime Verhagen Tuesday told the Netherlands’ Radio 1 Tuesday that he plans to propose changes to the draft documents at two final upcoming preparatory meetings. If that did not succeed, his country would boycott the gathering.

The preparatory meetings have been scheduled for mid-January and early April.

The Netherlands is only the second E.U. country to go that far. Verhagen’s Danish counterpart, Per Stig Moller, announced a similar stance earlier this year. Denmark’s key concern about the conference is a push by Islamic states to use the event to further a campaign to outlaw the “defamation” of religion. Critics charge that their goal is to deflect critical scrutiny of Islam, and say the move will jeopardize freedom of expression.

Next year’s conference aims to review progress made since the last U.N. racism conference, held in Durban, South Africa in 2001. The review conference, to be held in Geneva from April 20-24, has been dubbed “Durban II.”

The 2001 event, “Durban I,” was attended by delegates from 170 countries, including 16 heads of state and more than 100 foreign and other ministers.

It was characterized by controversy, and the U.S. and Israel governments withdrew their delegations in protest, with Washington citing the specific targeting of Israel “for censure and abuse.”

An “outcome document” for the 2009 conference has been drafted by a 20-member preparatory committee chaired by Libya, and including several countries hostile to Israel, among them Iran, Cuba and Pakistan.

The document accuses Israel of “practices of racial discrimination against the Palestinians,” and says its policies constitute “a new kind of apartheid, a crime against humanity [and] a form of genocide.” No other country is singled out.

In a section on religious defamation, the document identifies “Islamophobia” as a “contemporary manifestation of racism” and says Durban II must “seek proscription of this practice through legal and administrative measures. As the existing national laws and courts have failed to address the issue, internationally binding normative standards need to be devised.”

Verhagen said it appeared that the intention of next year’s event was to vilify Israel and condemn Western countries for slavery and colonialism.

“We want to seize all chances of combating racism and discrimination, but we are not lending ourselves to a propaganda circus,” he said. “I will not participate in anti-semitism.”

The Reformed Political Party, a veteran Protestant opposition faction, welcomed the minister’s statement, saying the Netherlands must not take part in events that are misused to put Israel in the dock.

'Racism conference won’t combat racism'

Earlier this month the head of a top E.U. human rights body, the Fundamental Rights Agency (FRA), urged the 27-member union not to miss the opportunity to participate in Durban II, saying that “much remains to be done to fight racism globally and regionally.”

A 850-word joint statement by FRA director Morten Kjaerum and the head of another European agency made no reference to the controversies that marred Durban I.

In response, Simon Wiesenthal Center director for international relations Shimon Samuels said the statement might be realistic “were Durban II to be a forum of European democracies.”

“The prime-movers of Durban II are, however, totalitarian hatemongers, serial human rights violators, silencers of free expression, terror-masters and genocidists in-waiting,” he said.

In the U.S., 24 prominent Americans put their names to a statement, carried as a full-page ad in the *Washington Times*, appealing for a U.S. stayaway.

The signatories urged Americans to write to Obama and Clinton. “Join us in calling for the United States to say yes to racial and religious equality and freedom from anti-semitism by saying no to attending the United Nations Durban II Conference,” the statement said.

“Make no mistake, this conference will not combat racism, but will promote and fuel hatred toward Israel, America and the free world. This conference will not be about the spread of free expression, but how to curb it.”

Nobel laureate Elie Wiesel, historian Bernard Lewis, Harvard Law School professor Alan Dershowitz and British-born journalist and author of *The American Century* Harold Evans were among the signatories. Others included Ali Alyami of the Center for Democracy and Human Rights in Saudi Arabia and Zuhdi Jasser, head of the American Islamic Forum for Democracy.