**Austria Pulls Out of ‘Anti-Israel’ Durban III Conference**

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Austria does not plan to attend the so-called Durban III antiracism conference, which is slated to take place on September 22 in New York City, a spokesman for Austria’s Foreign Ministry told The Jerusalem Post on Wednesday.

Austrian Foreign Ministry spokesman Alexander Schallenberg told the Post that “we have no intention of participating in Durban III in September.” Austria has now joined the anti-Durban group of countries, which includes Italy, the Netherlands, the Czech Republic, Australia, the United States, Canada and Israel.

Schallenberg said that Austria has “doubts about the content and direction of the conference” which is the reason for its decision to skip the event.

The September 22 Durban III event commemorates the 10th anniversary of the Durban I conference, which took place in Durban, South Africa. It was widely denounced as an anti-Semitic, UN-sponsored event that singled out Jews and Israel in order to attack them, including calls to abolish Israel.

Austria participated in Durban I in 2001 and the 2009 Durban II conference in Geneva. Foreign Minister Michael Spindelegger, from the Austrian People’s Party, has now, with his decision to boycott Durban III, placed Austria as the first Germanspeaking country in the anti-Durban camp.

In response to Austria’s decision to pull the plug on its participation in Durban III, Israel’s Ambassador to Austria, Aviv Shir-On, told the Post on Wednesday, “I was pleased to hear that our position on the Durban III process was accepted by the Austrian government.”

He added that “not only Israel sees the issue [Durban III] as problematic,” citing Canada, the US, the Netherlands, Italy and other countries that are staying away from the Durban conference.

Shir-On said “Israel was singled out and bashed at the first Durban conference” and the countries at Durban I were “not interested in fighting racism but criticizing Israel.” He said that does not mean that the “basic idea of fighting racism in all its forms is bad,” but the Durban process has steered away from its anti-racism mission. “I welcome the Austrian decision and that they realize this is a problem.”

Meanwhile, the Jewish community in Switzerland has objected to their country’s decision to participate in Durban III.

Jonathan Kreutner, secretary-general of the Swiss Israelite Community Federation, told the Post, “We all still have bad memories of Durban I.

In the conference’s official documents, Israel was the only country in the world to be mentioned negatively.

In addition, on the margins of the conference, in the NGO forum and on the streets in Durban, terrible anti-Israeli, even anti-Semitic, scenes played out.”

He added that “we find it very questionable that, in these circumstances, there are plans to remember this conference with a ‘birthday celebration.’ Of course, we would very much appreciate it if Switzerland would not be present at this 10-year celebration of the unfortunate Durban I conference.”

When asked about the Swiss Jewish community’s comments, Adrian Sollberger, a spokesman for the Swiss foreign ministry, wrote the Post that “Switzerland’s participation in the high-level meeting will be decided in timely fashion. The Bundesrat will make its decision in consideration of various conditions: among others, the anniversary even must deal with various racism questions in balanced fashion. It must not become a platform devoted exclusively to one particular situation (Middle East).”

Sollberger continued that “It is true that the Durban conference in 2001 and the Durban Review Conference in 2009 were overshadowed by polemicizing controversies. Nevertheless, the adoption of the ‘Durban Declaration and Program of Action’ was a milestone in the international and national struggle against racism. Switzerland has always condemned anti-Semitic statements and actions wherever and whenever they have occurred.”

Anne Bayefsky, who is the lead organizer of a counter-Durban III conference to be held in New York on September 22, told the Post, “Unfortunately, Swiss enthusiasm for Durban III and its anti-Israel and anti-Jewish message says more about today’s Switzerland than it does about the UN.”

The opposition Durban III conference is titled “The Perils of Global Intolerance: the United Nations and Durban III,” and Nobel Peace Prize Laureate and Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel is slated to speak at the counter event.

Bayefsky, an expert on human rights law and director of Touro College’s Institute on Human Rights and the Holocaust has scheduled a list of international speakers for the counter-Durban III conference.