

Regions Gear Up for Anti-Racism Conference

Asian minorities suffer the same discrimination in Asia that they face in the West. This was one of the major contentions discussed at the Preparatory Meeting for the Third World Conference Against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance organised by the United Nations last May.

At the first preparatory meeting for the World Conference Against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance (WCAR), it was recognised that racism and anti-Semitism does not preclude the existence of racism in Asia, Africa and Latin America as defined in Article I of the United Nations International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD). Majority of the 157 UN member states coming from Asia, Africa and Latin America have ratified the ICERD.

Racial discrimination is a global problem manifested in a variety of ways. Korean-Japanese, for example, have no right to hold public positions, be it a government job or an elected post in a local municipality, solely because of their ethnic origin. Until 1993, approximately, 700,000 Koreans who were born, brought up and educated in Japan were required by the Japanese law enforcement authorities to be fingerprinted like criminals. In Indonesia, on the other hand, it was only this year that the ethnic Chinese minority could celebrate their traditional Chinese New Year publicly. Curbs on the teaching of Chinese in schools or its usage in the public domain continue

to exist. Discrimination against indigenous populations is rampant in India, China, Indonesia, Bhutan and many other countries.

What is the UN World Conference Against Racism (WCAR)?

In 1997, the UN General Assembly agreed to hold the WCAR to encourage the international community to focus on causes and consequences of racism and to develop networks and practical responses to ensure equal human rights for all. The anti-Racism conference which is slated for 31 August to 7 September 2001 in South Africa is expected to become a critical venue for discussion in pursuit of the following objectives:

1. To review progress made in the fight against racism and racial discrimination and reappraise the obstacles to further progress in the field and ways to overcome them;
2. To increase the level of awareness about the scourges of racism and racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance;
3. To review the political, historical, economic, social, cultural and other factors leading to racism, racial discrimination and xenophobia; and
4. To formulate concrete recommendations to further action-oriented national, regional and international measures to combat all forms of racism.

Governments which ratified the ICERD will be encouraged to present at the conference their "best practices" with respect to implementing their obligations specified in the Convention.

NGO Forum

In conjunction with the official conference, an NGO Forum will be organised from 28 August to 1 September 2001.

This NGO Forum is a favourable space for civil-society actors seeking impact on the process of the World Conference, where the participants are mainly governments. It is an opportunity to express the proposals of civil society relating to the issues of racism and xenophobia.

Dates for Experts and Regional Meetings

As part of the preparations for the official conference in South Africa, a series of experts' group meetings and regional discussions were organised. These were:

16 to 18 February 2000 - experts' seminar for the Western States organised in cooperation with the government of Switzerland and held in Geneva

5 to 7 July 2000 - experts' seminar for the Central and Eastern European region organised in cooperation with the government of Poland and held in Warsaw

5 to 7 September 2000 - experts' seminar for Asia held in Thailand

6 October 2000 - experts' seminar for Africa held in Ethiopia

11 to 13 October 2000 - The Regional Preparatory Meeting for Europe organised by the Council of Europe and will be held in Strasbourg, France

10 to 11 October 2000 - The European NGO Forum. For further information

about these meetings, see the Website of the European Commission Against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI) at <<http://www.ecri.coe.int/en/07/01/e07010001.htm>>.

2 to 4 November 2000 (tentative) - The Regional Preparatory Meeting for Africa in Dakar, Senegal. For details and new schedule, contact Mr. Alioune Tine at <raddho@telecomplus.sn>.

Meanwhile, the following regional preparatory meetings are also set to take place:

5 to 7 December 2000 - The Regional Preparatory Meetings for the Americas in Santiago, Chile.

3 to 4 December 2000 - NGO Forum. For details, contact Ms. Ines Reichel at <ireichel@iidh.ed.cr>.

19 to 21 February 2001 - The Regional Preparatory Meeting for Asia will take in Teheran, Iran.

17 to 18 February 2001 - NGO Forum.

Who are organising the Conference?

Mary Robinson, the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, has been named secretary general for the Conference and the Geneva-based UN Commission on Human Rights will act as the official preparatory committee. Hamid Gaham, a senior human rights officer, has been appointed as the focal point person for the preparations.

Accreditation requests may be sent to Hamid Gaham, Senior Human Rights Officer, Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights by

Fax (4122) 917-0001 or by E-mail at <hgaham.hchr@unog.ch>.

Meanwhile, the South African National NGO Coalition or SANGOCO leads the Organizing Committee for the NGO Forum. The Committee is currently setting up offices and hiring core staff. Currently, the contact person is Mr. Moshe More. He may be reached at this E-mail address: <moshe@sangoco.org.za>.

The provisional committee for the NGO Forum is composed of the following:

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Sources: Women's Feature Service, UN Briefing Note Nos. 1-4, International Human Rights Law Group, ALAI