

# A WCAR in Brackets

Warm greetings to all WCAR participants!

In the sea of acronyms and jargon, that we have had to negotiate in the lead up to this Conference, we do hope that the acronym WCAR still holds meaning.

Lest we be accused of subscribing to UN speak, WCAR stands for the World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance—the third global effort led by the United Nations to address the age-old issue of racism, racial discrimination and other forms of intolerance.

We have come to Durban with different agenda and different expectations. Some are here to pursue a last-ditch effort to lobby governments to reflect issues of advocacy before yet another international document is signed; others, to forge linkages and strengthen networking with other groups who are addressing issues similar to theirs. There are those who have come to further assert their visibility and draw attention to their concerns. Most of us, however, are here to accomplish a combination, if not all, of those agenda cited above.

The UN's propaganda machine projects WCAR as the Conference that will "focus on action-oriented and practical steps to eradicate racism, including measures of prevention, education and protection and the provision of effective remedies." The WCAR is touted to be "a unique and important opportunity to create a new world vision for the fight against racism in the 21st century."

However, those of us who have been keeping abreast of the debates and processes in the lead up to Durban harbour no illusions as to what can or cannot be achieved during the Conference.

At the conclusion of the Third Preparatory committee Meeting in Geneva on 10 August, it was made very clear where governments stand on particular issues—the lines have been clearly drawn so to speak. The way in which governments have aligned themselves in these negotiations mirror current geo-political dynamics. For example, the European Union (EU) bracketed references to the "sources, causes, forms and contemporary manifestations of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance such as slavery, slave trade, colonialism, and

other forms of servitude especially committed against Africans, people of African descent and Indigenous Peoples." The most that this powerful block can accept is some vague language that refers to "certain aspects of colonialism." Furthermore, the EU has aligned itself with the United States in opposing other forms of compensation such as debt repudiation or remedial development policies.

It is no surprise that the word compensatory in the chapter of the WCAR Declaration on Provision of Effective Remedies, Recourse, Redress, [Compensatory] and Other Measures at the National, Regional, and International Levels, remains in brackets. This is due to the fact that up to now, colonial nations such as the United States, France and the United Kingdom still refuse to recognise the scourges of their imperialism. Expect any reference to distant and recent history of colonialism in the WCAR document to be strongly blocked.

Another area that remains contentious is migration. Depending on the situation of migration in their respective countries, government delegates are at loggerheads over the inclusion of any reference to the "irregular" situation of migrants. The conflicts are predictable. For instance, the Latin American and Caribbean Group (GRULAC) asserts the need to assure protection for their people who are working and living in the U.S. The U.S., on the other hand, is adamant on limiting the scope of the provisions to documented migrants. Meanwhile, labour exporting countries such as the Philippines contend that the paragraphs should include "migrant workers and their families."

Likewise, the list of victims of and grounds for racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance will continue to be a big debate as it was the Third PrepCom. One very touchy point is that of caste-based discrimination, otherwise referred to as discrimination based on work and descent.

Finally, expect the Conference to be another venue of debate over the Palestine situation. With the escalating violence in this part of the Middle East, a polarisation between delegations in support of either Palestine and Israel will be more evident.

Despite and perhaps because of all of these controversies and debates, we, and other NGOs look forward to a meaningful

participation that is worth every dollar and rand we were able to raise to enable us to come to this historic Conference. What is crucial for NGOs is to seek out possible alliances around basic human rights principles. Given the dynamics playing out between governments of the North and the South, NGOs face the challenge of negotiating for language in the midst of a diversity of views on issues of common concerns even amongst NGOs.

We would like to encourage everyone to make use of every available means and resources to hear the voices and solicit the views of those who were not able to come here whether for lack of resources or because they were not accredited to participate as in the case of our sisters and brothers in the International Lesbian and Gay Association.

Because we view the WCAR as a venue to raise and hopefully seek out meaningful strategies for combating old and new forms of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance, this special issue of *Women in Action* (WIA) features a mixed bag of articles.

Some articles have been reprinted from a previous WIA issue: including articles on religious fundamentalism in Indonesia; Malaysian women's experiences and analysis of fundamentalism; as well as one on the conflict situation in Kashmir, the border state between India and Pakistan. At the same time, it also includes new ones such as the article on why the intersectionality approach to analysing the different forms and causes of racial discrimination works; reflections on global media and racism; and a situationer on the Dalits, the untouchables of India.

As diverse as the issues of the Conference are, so too are the articles and stories that are featured in this special issue of WIA. However, we are confident that while we, NGOs, may differ in our views and perspectives on all of these issues, we will, as human rights activists, be able to find some areas of unity and ample spaces for our diversity.

We wish everyone a fruitful Conference!

