Eliminating Racism

*Statement to the forty-fifth session of the United Nations Commission on Human Rights Agenda Item 17 (b): Implementation of the Programme of Action for the Second Decade to Combat Racism and Racial Discrimination*

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Just as a fever is a symptom of disease in the body, racism is a symptom of disease in society. Suppressing the symptom does not cure the disease, but curing the disease eliminates the symptom. The Baha'i International Community is convinced that the disease from which society currently suffers is failure to recognize the principle of the oneness of humanity, and racism is but a symptom. If we wish to eliminate racism entirely, we must establish, as the moral of foundation for society, the unshakable conviction of the oneness of the human race.

This is a bold assertion, but one we believe is upheld by the conclusions of the Global Consultation on Racism and Racial Discrimination held in October 1988, pursuant to General Assembly resolution 42/47. This historic consultation was held to further the goals of the Second Decade to Combat Racism and Racial Discrimination. The conclusion of the Conference participants was that the international community is "confronted today with a new challenge of racism and racial discrimination which (has) infiltrated many parts of human society and questioned its spiritual and moral foundation." In questioning the spiritual and moral foundation of society, racism could have a strangely positive effect. To continue the disease analogy, the more unpleasant the symptom, the more powerful our motivation to combat the disease.

From the Baha'i perspective, racism is one of the most baneful and persistent evils in society. Racial discrimination is baneful because it violates the dignity of human beings. And yet it persists. Racism is poisonous because it cripples its victims, corrupts its perpetrators, and blights human progress. And yet it persists. Why? We believe that racism persists precisely because it is deeply rooted in outdated attitudes and erroneous beliefs.

Accordingly, any campaign to eradicate racism must change those attitudes and beliefs. Although necessary, political action alone cannot offer a permanent solution. In the Baha'i view, racism will be eliminated only when the peoples of the world are convinced of the oneness of humankind and proceed to reconstruct their lives and their societies on that basis.

The recognition of the oneness of mankind would require the abandonment of all doctrines of superiority, many of which still persist implicitly despite our preoccupation with its more obvious forms such as apartheid. More importantly, by establishing the foundation for true co-operation, the recognition of this principle would raise civilization to a new level. At this higher level, no one need fear oppression, even those who were formerly oppressors. The sharing of power and responsibility among all citizens can then be implemented without fear, through appropriate legal measures and equitable social and economic policies.

The Baha'i International Community commends the United Nations for facilitating and coordinating an international educational campaign against racism. With the proclamation of the Second Decade, the United Nations has taken the first step towards the implementation of such a campaign, and we applaud the various international activities that it has already undertaken in this connection. Moreover, we welcome the General Assembly's renewed invitation to UNESCO, in General Assembly resolution 42/47, to expedite the preparation of teaching materials on racism and racial discrimination, with particular emphasis on activities at the primary and secondary school levels.

We submit, however, that a more sustained and far-reaching educational campaign is called for. First, although the United Nations can facilitate such an effort, we are convinced that such a campaign must be undertaken at the grassroots level. The aim must be to create a more universal awareness of racial equality and the need for racial unity. Secondly, we are convinced that the presentation of factual information about the problems of racism will be insufficient to change attitudes. Hearts must be touched by an awareness of the bonds that unite people of all races. We, therefore, suggest that UNESCO be asked to develop a model universal curriculum on the more fundamental principle of the unity of humankind.

We also wish to urge the participants in the international struggle against racism to avoid politicizing these activities. Experience has taught us that when an issue becomes politically contentious, paralysis ensues. This applies both to standard-setting and implementing activities. No nation can claim to be entirely free of racist tendencies; therefore, we can approach this problem as a shared human problem. International human rights co-operation can thus be greatly ameliorated if member states adopt a more constructive approach.

A further means of improving international co-operation and co-ordination in this field is to ensure the continued and strengthened involvement of non-governmental organizations. NGOs usually take a relatively impartial and independent approach to human rights issues. In most cases, they are not bound by vested state interests and can thus aid the deliberations by refraining from involvement in ideological strife and politicization. Moreover, NGOs have, in many cases, developed solid expertise that can prove valuable to international human rights work. Finally, because some NGOs represent large memberships, often from a wide range of countries and cultures, they are indispensable assets to the international human rights machinery.

The Baha'i International Community, for example, has over a century of experience in building communities committed to the principle of the oneness of mankind. Since the mid-19th century, myriad religious, racial, ethnic, cultural, linguistic and national elements have come together to promote the concept of unity in diversity. Our programme for the realization of racial unity is at once social, spiritual and organic. Recognizing that commitment to a spiritual principle has social implications, the Baha'i system of community organization employs practical measures to encourage the participation of minorities. The principle of racial equality is taught, and individuals are encouraged to identify and overcome old patterns of behaviour.

Thus, concerted effort on the part of ordinary people has brought about a unique form of racial integration in Baha'i communities in every part of the world. If our experience can in any way contribute to the struggle against racism and racial discrimination, we are happy to offer it for study.