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LETTER TO THE EDITOR:

# A Response to Tom Lantos’ “The Durban Debacle”

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We are writing in response to Tom Lantos’ Winter/Spring article [“The Durban Debacle: An Insider’s View of the UN World Conference Against Racism,” *The Fletcher Forum of World Affairs* 26 (1) (Winter/Spring 2002): 31-52], which presents one insider’s view of the UN World Conference Against Racism that took place in Durban, South Africa, during the summer of 2001. We were also inside the World Conference and came away with a very different view. We share many of Congressman Lantos’ fundamental concerns about problems with the World Conference, both in terms of its process and outcome. Yet we take strong exception to central elements of his analysis both with respect to what went wrong at Durban and what should have been done to avoid it.

We are very troubled by much of what Congressman Lantos writes about the conference, particularly regarding the role of the U.S. government. We find it paradoxical that on the one hand Congressman Lantos claims that “U.S. withdrawal from the world stage places our interests in jeopardy,” while on the other hand he encouraged the U.S. government to walk out of the Durban meeting. Prior to the conference we wrote an Op/Ed piece [“Bush should have sent Powell to Racism Talks,” *The Boston Globe* (August 29, 2001): A25] arguing that a strong U.S. presence in Durban would offer hope around the world by providing an example of our own progress in addressing issues of racism and discrimination over the last 50 years. In our view, Secretary of State Colin Powell was the ideal representative to deliver that message. His life and career have embodied the struggle for racial equality and the rights of immigrants in U.S. society—and his achievements as a military leader and now as a diplomat personify our society’s progress.

A strong U.S. presence at the Durban conference also would have enabled the U.S. to directly challenge the efforts by some to use the conference to promote anti-Semitic and other racist sentiments. By walking out, the U.S. forfeited that opportunity and exacerbated the problem.

We also saw U.S. participation in the Durban conference as a way to further acknowledge the historic wounds caused by slavery and by racial discrimination in

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our own society. Durban proved a significant advancement for African-descendant peoples from around the globe. The World Conference was quite simply the first UN-sponsored proceeding to formally recognize the transatlantic slave trade and slavery itself as crimes against humanity. This extraordinary development sets the stage for internal challenges by citizens against their own countries for the continuing deprivations caused by slavery and race-based discrimination. Like other countries willing to engage in the process at Durban, the U.S. needs to find ways to acknowledge its past, as a basis for future actions aimed at combating racism. By walking out of the World Conference, as Congressman Lantos and others urged, the U.S. abandoned its opportunity to take part in this historic achievement.

Moreover, we take strong exception to Congressman Lantos' criticism of us and other U.S.-based rights activists for participating in the World Conference, and for doing "almost nothing" to denounce anti-Semitism at the conference. To the contrary, we—and others—objected to language in the NGO document when it was proposed and publicly criticized the lack of civility displayed by some participants. We were prohibited by conference rules from voting against the NGO document because objections could be voiced only by a consensus of the caucus of international NGOs that we were a part of. However, we did organize a joint press conference in Durban on September 5, where we strongly criticized the language in the NGO document as "inaccurate and inflammatory." We chastised the NGO conference for failing to set a tone of civility—themes we continued to stress in numerous interviews with newspaper reporters and in radio and television interviews, with both American and international media.

Finally, we reject Congressman Lantos' apocalyptic assessment of Durban. While recognizing the meeting's serious failures, we nonetheless believe that the World Conference prevailed in many ways. In addition to the historic characterization of slavery as a crime against humanity, the conference also succeeded in highlighting a number of contemporary problems of racism and racial discrimination by putting them more squarely on the international agenda. To cite a few examples, the final conference documents provide a much clearer international recognition of the human rights of migrants. The conference also helped to bring an increased public profile to the plight of the Dalits (the caste of "untouchables" in India and elsewhere), the Roma (the group disparagingly called "gypsies" who are subject to social and economic prejudice across Europe), and other marginalized groups. Additionally, the conference process led to the formation of many international ties between civil society leaders and activists around the world. In the months since the conference's close, much activity has taken place to further strengthen these burgeoning relationships, many of which are between U.S.-based NGOs and representatives of the Dalits; the Roma; Afro-Brazilians and other African-descendant Latinos; indigenous peoples from Australia, Alaska, and Canada; and others from around the world. In our own society, the Durban conference provided a focal

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point for a range of U.S. domestic groups to come together, perhaps as never before, to explore common strategies for developing a human rights agenda for the United States.

Despite these objections, we do agree with Congressman Lantos on three key points. First, in many ways the Durban meeting was a "missed opportunity," as Lantos says, to advance a progressive international agenda to address the problems of racism, racial discrimination, and xenophobia. The World Conference took place at a decisive moment in time. The twentieth century—which saw the emergence of the United Nations and of race and ethnicity as central elements of international relations and domestic politics—had just come to a close. The World Conference Against Racism seemed poised to capture the international spotlight and illuminate issues at the core of the civil and human rights agenda for the twenty-first century. Many of these issues, which affect each of us in our own communities and underlie much of the instability and insecurity we face around the world, escaped thorough interrogation at the World Conference. The fact that governments had such a difficult time addressing these matters in Durban underscores the pressing need to find a common language and an international framework for addressing them in the future.

Second, like Congressman Lantos, we were deeply troubled by and rejected language in conference debates and documents relating to Israel, particularly in the Final Declaration and Plan of Action adopted by the nongovernmental organizations. At a press conference we organized in Durban, we publicly stated:

Anti-Semitic sentiments expressed at the conference are repugnant and reprehensible. We respect the right of everyone to engage in vigorous and open debate on important civil and human rights issues, but we also believe that all voices should be heard in a manner that is consistent with the underlying spirit of the conference. Nongovernmental organizations should set an example for governments to follow by using a civil tone in their discourse, and recognizing that there are a wide range of critical global issues that are imperative for a conference on racism and racial discrimination to examine.

As Congressman Lantos observed, some of the debate related to Israel spilled over into broader anti-Semitic comments and actions. We deplored these actions, which should have no place at international meetings such as the Durban conference, or anywhere else.

Third, we share Congressman Lantos' plea for U.S. engagement and involvement. He writes that American leaders who "absolve the United States from the world's problems" do so "at the peril of our own national security interests." We would go further. In our view, the U.S. can and should play a leadership role in advancing an affirmative global civil and human rights agenda, both by addressing these issues in our own society and by diplomatic leadership around the world.

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Issues of racial discrimination and xenophobia need to be an integral part of this global rights agenda.

Ultimately, the Durban conference underscored the need for all of us to find a common language and framework for addressing the sensitive and difficult issues of racism and racial discrimination worldwide. This is an imposing task, and one to which Congressman Lantos' analysis unfortunately pays too little attention.

Sincerely,

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