

At Race Talks, Delegates Cite Early Doubts

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At Race Talks, Delegates Cite Early Mistrust

By RACHEL L. SWARNS

DURBAN, South Africa, Sept. 4 — As South Africa and the European Union scrambled tonight to salvage a United Nations conference on racism here, the delegates who had gathered from across the world were trying to figure out what went wrong and how.

The South African government presented revised drafts of the proposed conference declaration and action plan tonight to a team of negotiators headed by Belgium.

The team is charged with removing the criticisms of Israel that led American and Israeli officials to withdraw from the conference on Monday.

Whether the negotiators will find an acceptable compromise remains to be seen. But some diplomats here said the conference was doomed from the start because its organizers failed to resolve the prickly issues before the meeting opened last week.

The issues were even a concern in the United States from the earliest days of the Bush administration. [Page A8.]

Four weeks ago, Mary Robinson, the United Nations commissioner for human rights, stood before a crowd of anxious diplomats in Geneva and reassured them that the meeting was on track. The Arabs were compromising on language that sharply criticized Israel, she said. The Americans were negotiating.

And within days the news was flashing around the world. "Zionism Scrapped From Racism Summit Agenda," one headline said. The meeting — which was intended to raise the world's consciousness about intolerance of all forms — was

going to be a success. But some diplomats left that meeting in Geneva shaking their heads. They knew trouble was looming.

A seven-page compromise plan presented by the Arab League in August had eliminated the word "Zionist" but kept references to "the racist practices of the Occupying Power." Negotiators assigned to ease American and Israeli concerns often lacked political clout. And as bombs exploded and tanks rolled in the Middle East, some Palestinians and Israelis dug in their heels and refused to bargain seriously even though time was running out.

On Monday, the United States and Israel walked out of the racism conference, denouncing "hateful language" in a proposed declaration that condemns Israel. Today, as the Americans flew out of this city, officials from the United Nations and South Africa expressed shock and regret and moved quickly to consider new language.

But diplomats familiar with the negotiations say Mrs. Robinson, the conference coordinator, South African officials and others have known for months that trouble was brewing.

United Nations officials insisted publicly last month that the "Zionism equals racism" phrase was dead, but they were still building a conference around draft documents that described Israel's treatment of the Palestinians as a "new kind of apartheid."

And despite talk from both sides about the need for compromise, there was precious little room to maneuver.

The Palestinians, supported by the South Africans and Arab nations, insisted that their suffering be included in any declaration about discrimination. Israel, supported by the United States and European countries, insisted that it should not be the only country singled out for intolerance in a general document that condemns discrimination across the world.

Today, the Belgian foreign minister, Louis Michel, and the South African foreign minister, Dr. Nkosazana Zuma, were actively involved in the negotiations to eliminate the wording that Western countries have found offensive, officials said.

Some critics say that such senior officials should have been deeply involved in the rewriting of sensitive



Reuters

Mary Robinson, the United Nations commissioner for human rights, remains optimistic.

A team in Durban is charged with removing the criticisms of Israel.

language long before the conference opened here on Friday. They blamed poor management and a shortage of political will among negotiating countries for the lingering stalemate.

"We knew we had to face the problem in Geneva, but everybody avoided it, swept it under the carpet," said a European diplomat who was involved in last-ditch negotiations this week to keep the United States and Israel from pulling out.

"People knew this would be very difficult, a mission impossible or a mission extremely difficult," said the diplomat, who spoke on condition of anonymity. "If one question could lead to great complications in Durban, that would be the Middle East."

Other issues are simmering here, of course, and several countries are using their political influence to keep them off the agenda.

The United States, for instance,

has objected to language in the conference declaration that describes slavery as "a crime against humanity," fearing that it might be faced with lawsuits by the descendants of slaves.

Some European countries have objected to the suggestion that they offer an "apology" for colonialism. India has lobbied against any mention of its "untouchables," the underclass that is sometimes deprived of land ownership and required to drink and eat from separate utensils.

But no other topic has been as sensitive as the question of whether Israel should be singled out for condemnation. It has been a contentious issue since February when officials gathered for a United Nations meeting in Tehran proposed a declaration that assailed Israel's treatment of Palestinians as "a new kind of apartheid."

And by early August, only weeks before the conference opened, the sides were still deadlocked.

"Geneva should have dealt with a lot of the problems before we got to Durban," a senior South African official said in an interview today. "We're only started now getting in the nitty-gritty."

Last week, Secretary of State Colin L. Powell formally announced that he would not attend the conference because the dispute remained unresolved. The United States sent a mid-level delegation to negotiate instead.

Those talks broke down on Monday when Arab nations rejected an 11-page compromise plan proposed by Norway and supported by the United States and Israel. The draft eliminated all phrases like "racist, settled ideology" and the "racist practice of Zionism." But it also eliminated any reflection of the Palestinian suffering.

The new negotiating team, which includes representatives from South Africa, Belgium, Norway, Namibia and the Arab League, plans to complete its deliberations tomorrow.

Today, Mrs. Robinson said she believed that a chance still existed to salvage the conference by coming up with some consensus on language describing the Middle East conflict. She said she believed that the team would develop a declaration against racism that could be supported by all nations.

"I believe we're back on course," Mrs. Robinson said. "Everybody knows time is short. We've come a long, long way to get here."