

# UN conference was exploited for extremist remarks, says Vatican rep

VATICAN CITY – An international conference dedicated to combating racism unfortunately was used as a platform for taking “extreme and offensive political positions the Holy See deplores and rejects,” said the chief Vatican representative to U.N. agencies in Geneva.

The Durban Review Conference was meant to be an “occasion to set aside mutual difference and mistrust; reject once more any theory of racial or ethnic superiority; and renew the international community’s commitment to the elimination of all expressions of racism,” said Archbishop Silvano Tomasi.

While the work of the April 20-24 conference took a step forward in combating racism, it “has unfortunately been used to utter extreme and offensive political positions,” which do not contribute to dialogue, “provoke unacceptable conflicts, and in no way can be approved or shared,” he told conference participants in Geneva April 22. The Vatican released a copy of the archbishop’s remarks late that same day.

The archbishop was referring to remarks Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad made about Israel at the U.N.-sponsored conference April 20.

Mr. Ahmadinejad said that Israel had “resorted to military aggression to make an entire nation homeless under the pretext of Jewish suffering” and had established a “totally racist government in the occupied Palestine.” His comments prompted a temporary walkout by dozens of diplomats in attendance.

The U.N. conference, which was a follow-up meeting to examine a statement adopted in 2001 at the U.N.’s first conference on racism held in Durban, South Africa, was being boycotted by the United States, Canada and several other Western countries. The boycott stemmed from fears the Geneva conference would provide a platform to critics of Israel.

Archbishop Tomasi underlined the Vatican’s position, which also had been expressed

by Pope Benedict XVI April 19, that participation in the conference was an important way to promote concrete measures to prevent and eliminate every form of racism and intolerance.

The reason most countries chose to participate in the conference and not walk out was a desire to make progress in eliminating old and new forms of racism, said the archbishop.

U.N. officials said that the text under consideration in Geneva was revised in recent months, and the latest draft does not include references to Israel or Zionism.

Archbishop Tomasi told Catholic News Service April 20 that much more significant than Mr. Ahmadinejad's speech were the real advances made in the draft conference document, which recognizes the Holocaust as something not to be forgotten and condemns anti-Semitism as well as intolerance against other religions.

In his speech April 22 to U.N. delegates, the archbishop said racism, discrimination, xenophobia and intolerance "are evils that corrode the social fabric of society and produce innumerable victims."

"Combating racism is a necessary and indispensable prerequisite for the construction of governance, sustainable development, social justice, democracy and peace in the world," he said.

Coming together to share ideas and implement recommendations "is the duty and responsibility of everyone," he said.

Archbishop Tomasi said education, the media and faith-based communities play an instrumental role in helping shape mentalities and consciences that are free from fear and prejudice against others.

He also expressed the Vatican's alarm at "the still latent temptation of eugenics that can be fueled by techniques of artificial procreation and the use of 'superfluous embryos.'"

"The possibility of choosing the color of the eyes or other physical characteristic of a child could lead to the creation of a 'subcategory of human beings' or the elimination

of human beings that do not fulfill the characteristics predetermined by a given society,” he said.

He also warned against the introduction of “excessive measures and practices” in the legitimate fight against terrorism.

Efforts for greater security should never exacerbate people’s irrational fear of foreigners or undermine the protection and promotion of human rights, he said.