



THE

DURBAN DIARIES

What Really Happened at the UN Conference
Against Racism in Durban (2001)

BY

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WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY
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WHY DURBAN MATTERS

In 2001, one week before the September 11th terrorist attacks in New York and Washington D.C. the UN hosted the “World Conference on Racism” (WCAR) in Durban, South Africa. This conference, which was supposed to defend the noble goal of combating racism, instead became a platform for attacking Israel and invoked the infamous and spurious allegation that Zionism is a form of racism. Even worse than the official conference itself was the NGO Forum, where many participants openly expressed hatred toward Israel, Zionism, and threatened representatives of Jewish NGOs participating in the event. Despite this dark legacy, the United Nations will mark the 20th anniversary of the conference commonly known as Durban on September 22.

American Jewish Committee (AJC) has always been committed to fighting racism and upholding democratic values and human dignity in the U.S. and around the world. Racism, racial discrimination, and xenophobia still exist today and AJC stays committed in building alliances to fight these ills. But it is precisely AJC’s fundamental commitment to these universal principles that renders the instrumentalization of antiracism at Durban and beyond all the more troubling to us.

It is for this reason that for the past several months AJC has advocated for governments of goodwill not to participate in the 20th anniversary commemoration of the Durban conference and Durban Declaration and Program of Action. Instead, those countries should support alternative, nondiscriminatory initiatives to address racism outside the Durban framework. Since previous such calls have largely been ignored, AJC expects the highly contentious documents and the spirit of the 2001 conference will be reaffirmed just as they were at the commemoration 10 years ago.

In the following brochure we will take a deep dive into the 2001 WCAR conference and the NGO Forum in Durban and link to articles that reflect on the conference's repercussions today for Jews and for the West more generally.

To do so, we are republishing excerpts of the 2001 on-the ground account from human rights expert Joëlle Fiss. Fiss, who is a human rights lawyer today, served as President of the European Union of Jewish Students (EUJS) and led its delegation in Durban twenty years ago. Published at the time by AJC as *Durban Diaries*, the account offers both a naked look at the astonishing level of antisemitic hate expressed there and a personal account of disbelief, dismay, and fear that so many Jews in Europe would experience from that point onward. It offers insights into the brutality unleashed in Durban and the collective anger against Israel, the United States, and the West in general. In passing, it also offers one of the few accounts of the direct links between Durban and 9/11 with the mention of Ahmed Deedat, son of the international preacher Yussuf Deedat, financed by Osama Bin Laden.

French political scientist Pierre-André Taguieff, who has written several books on antisemitism and more specifically on what he has called the “new Judeophobia,” has been one of the first to grasp the dimension of this “new antisemitism” even well before Durban. In an interview he delivers his analysis of the ongoing consequences of Durban (and before) until today and notably how the year 2001 was not only the year of “the great shift that has led to international Islamist terrorism,” but also the year of “the ideological corruption of anti-racism, the cynical instrumentalization of human rights and the decline of Western democracies.” He further demonstrates the interaction between different forms of antisemitism (far left, far right and Islamist) and how unconditional support for Palestinians and the anti-Zionist ideology have, since the 1970s, been the driving force behind the globalization of Jew-hatred we face today. Read the interview with Taguieff at [AJC.org/DurbanNewAntisemitism](https://www.ajc.org/durban-new-antisemitism).

As a final thought, just as the attacks of 9/11 did not happen in a vacuum, the same is true for Durban. It too had sweeping consequences – from the globalization of extremism and the mainstreaming of antisemitism, to the weakening of the post-war world order and growing threat to liberal democracies. If we are to face these enormous challenges of the coming decades, we need to reflect on how we got here. What happened twenty years ago in Durban should have a central role in that reflection. It is our hope that this brochure will contribute toward that goal.

***Simone Rodan-Benzaquen**, Managing Director of AJC Europe*

Join AJC in our efforts to counter and confront all forms of antisemitism and anti-Zionism.

To take part in AJC's advocacy efforts urging nations to not attend the UN's September 2021 Durban commemoration event, and for continually updated information about the Durban conference's impact on the spread of antisemitism and more, go to [AJC.org/Durban](https://www.ajc.org/Durban)

THE DURBAN DIARIES

SEPTEMBER 2001 (EXCERPTS) BY JOËLLE FISS

In September 2001, Joëlle Fiss led the delegation of the European Union of Jewish Students (UEJF) to Durban. The UEJF had a stand at the NGO Forum in Durban, which preceded the Intergovernmental Conference between August 27 and September 2.

The diary she kept is one of the rare testimonies of what happened there.

Monday, August 27TH

Midnight, Hotel Elangeni, World Youth Summit

As soon as we land in Durban, we are driven to a seaside hotel. Since yesterday, 700 youth activists have gathered there. Tomorrow they will go to the Kingsmead Cricket Stadium, where the youth organizations and NGOs will simultaneously hold working sessions to draft two documents to submit to the UN at the beginning of the intergovernmental conference.

Echoes of “Free, free Palestine!” greet us as we slip into the hotel where the World Youth Summit (an international gathering that preceded the UN Conference against Racism) is in full swing. These words keep buzzing in our ears until our departure, resonating each evening in our heads before falling asleep. The slogans will be the first chants we hear people yelling when arriving at the stadium every single morning.

Still jet-lagged, we wend ourselves through the crowds and hullabaloo at the reception area in order to find our colleagues from the European Union of Jewish Students who arrived the day before. Hundreds of young people are clustered in the hotel. Many wear the same T-shirt. At first sight, it looks exactly like the one distributed to the participants at the conference. Yet, after a closer look, underneath the logo of the UN, we can read the following words: “Racism can, will and must be defeated. Apartheid is real.” A reproduction of

the photo of Palestinian child Mohammed al-Dura shows him crouching behind his father just before his reported killing during a skirmish at the start of the Second Intifada. The photo is accompanied by the caption: “Killed on September 30, 2000, for being Palestinian. Since then, over 532 persons killed, a third children.” On the back of the T-shirt: “Occupation = Colonialism = Racism. End Israeli apartheid.”

A sheet is being distributed to all those present. It is the UN resolution adopted by the General Assembly in 1975 that equates Zionism with racism. There is no mention that this resolution was rescinded by a vote of 111 to 25 in the same assembly in 1991. On walls, a poster shows Nelson Mandela quoted as saying, “Fighting for the rights of the Palestinians.” There’s a guy not far away who is taping swastikas to the wall. T-shirts that say, “End Israeli Apartheid” have been fraudulently printed with the official logo of the UN conference. The human rights commissioner Mary Robinson has just forbidden them to be displayed. Yet dozens of participants continue to wear them, right in front of her eyes. From the start, Durban gives a strong impression of chaos.

Tuesday, August 28TH

Kingsmead Cricket Stadium, Start of the NGO Forum

9 AM: The Kingsmead Cricket Stadium is situated near the Convention Center, where the intergovernmental conference will be held. The place looks like a huge football stadium, scattered with white tents everywhere. Inside each one, a podium and seats are set up to hold working sessions. Journalists with microphones are hungrily seeking sound bites and chatting with the participants. We all try to become familiar with this curious and exotic landscape.

Three hundred Indian Dalits march before our eyes. They denounce the condition of 250 million “Untouchables,” victims of the caste system. Africans

with colorful robes walk by, and then a Mexican in traditional dress. Numerous African and Asian NGOs are fighting for the recognition of slavery as a crime against humanity. They call upon Europe and the United States to face up to their past. They intend to proclaim loud and clear that colonialism leads to racism. They advocate for concrete measures to rectify past tragedies and call on the forum to honor the memory of African victims. They urge all nations who bear historical responsibility to make formal apologies during the conference.

The stadium brims with stands draped with posters. Tables overflow with informational flyers; posters are pasted on walls; slogans hang in the air. Wherever you turn, you see logos, flags, and photographs. With your eyes continually solicited, it's easy, during a simple stroll, to absorb the great variety of ethnic groups and their demands.

Gradually, the stadium fills with newcomers. Many participants are wearing the T-shirt from the day before forbidden by Mary Robinson. Palestinian flags are displayed in all corners and angles. The stadium is being painted with kaffiyehs. Wherever you turn, Israel is compared to Nazi Germany. Posters associate Israel with the former South African regime and its apartheid policies. Everywhere, there are images of suffering Palestinian children. Arab women display photos of their "martyred" husbands, killed during the Second Intifada. The stand of the Arab Lawyers Union is selling *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. Caricatures are hung up. One of them depicts a rabbi with *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* under his arm and an Israeli army cap on his head. Another poster describes how the Jews make their bread: with the blood of Muslims.

Opening Ceremony of the NGO Forum

9 AM: Eight thousand participants in the NGO Forum take their seats to listen to the welcome speeches of the NGO Forum's opening ceremony. They represent 3,000 NGOs that came from the four corners of the globe. The seats are filled to capacity. At first glance, when you enter the open-air theater, a

large banner of several meters is being waved by four individuals: “Racism: Right of return to Jews. No right of return to Palestinians.”

Mercia Andrews, president of the South African National NGO Coalition (SANGOCO), the organization responsible for the smooth running of the conference, addresses the crowd and clarifies that the conference will deal with two major subjects: the Israeli occupation of Palestine and the condition of Dalits in India. The crowd applauds frenetically, dozens of participants stand up and burst into a chant of “Free, free Palestine!”

Spotlights are suddenly switched on and color the stage. A group of African dancers dash out from backstage and perform traditional Zulu dances. The participants start swaying to the warm and upbeat rhythms of the party. The concert is in full swing.

Our group can’t share the bubbly spirit of brotherhood. It is impossible for us to ignore this banner, this speech, and this collective reaction. We already feel different. We leave the party with a lump in our throats.

At the accreditation bureau, each delegate must fill out a form to receive his or her badge and enter the conference zone. People need to wait in line for hours. The air is humid. Sweat is trickling from the foreheads of the participants, who try to fight off the heat. Bored, we all think we are missing lots of interesting meetings. Fill out the form, sign, and wait. Julian sees a rabbi, all in black, bearded, and with a *kippa* on his head. “Ah, this conference cannot be so bad if an Orthodox rabbi is participating in it,” Julian muses, determined to downplay the bizarre happenings of the day. His glance falls on the rabbi’s badge: “Islamic Republic of Iran.” Incredible! He thinks perhaps this will be the first time he meets a member of the Jewish community of Iran, so rich in history and tradition but isolated today. But how strange! The rabbi’s badge gives him access to the governmental conference. It must be an administrative error, says Julian to himself. Israel follows Iran alphabetically.

Perhaps he represents an Israeli religious party.

Andrew, too, waits in the endless line. A member of the Arab Lawyers Union offers a brochure to those who are bored queuing. The cover superimposes a swastika on the Star of David. The notebook abounds with antisemitic caricatures: Jews with long hooked noses smile cruelly. Their serpent fangs are soaked in blood. They are depicted as sadists, obsessed with money. Their military uniforms are decorated with swastikas. And to perfect the picture, these Judeo-Nazis are pointing their rifles at terrified Palestinians.

Andrew cannot get over it. Those waiting in line casually flip through the pages, rather indifferently. Why is he the only one to react? On behalf of the organization he runs in Geneva, UN Watch, an affiliate institute of American Jewish Committee, he calls to cancel the accreditation of the Arab Lawyers Union to the gathering, on the grounds of racist defamation. He sends his request at once to the steering committee. A few hours later, an answer is given to him: "Sorry, we cannot do anything. This brochure is a political expression."

3:35 PM: At the committee on the theme "Colonialism and Foreign Occupation," a speaker declares: "The Jewish NGOs intend to divide the world's antiracist movement." Crowds break into applause.

5 PM: At the thematic committee devoted to "Ethnic Cleansing, Conflict and Genocide," a speaker declares that the existence of Israel is a hate crime. Somebody asks a question about procedure; he is booed, to shouts of "Jew, Jew, Jew." A South African Jew is called an "Israeli dog."

6 PM: Young people carrying "Apartheid Is Real" posters also hand out a book titled, *Israel, An Apartheid State*. A man offers a pamphlet with Adolf Hitler's photo on it to the crowd. The text reads: "What if I had won? The good thing is there would have been no Israel and no Palestinian bloodshed. The rest is

your guess. The bad thing is I would not have allowed the making of the new Beetle. The rest is your guess.” We shall discover in the September 9th edition of the *South African Sunday Times* that the author of this pamphlet is an influential member of the Muslim community of Durban, Yousuf Deedat. The Deedat family claims to be a “friend” of Osama bin Laden, who is supposed to have generously contributed to the financing of their organization, the Islamic Propagation Centre (IPC). The article emphasizes that approximately \$3 million dollars were transferred by the Bin Laden family to the bank account of this Islamic center over the last three years.

Wednesday, August 29TH

10 AM: The student delegates of the Jewish caucus (we’re around a dozen) decide to put up our own stand near the press tent, at the main entrance of the NGO Forum. Let’s do what all the others are doing. It’s time to hand out our pamphlets. Let’s explain our slogans.

At first, passersby are oddly interested in our “stand,” a simple two-meter-long wooden table, with a pile of pamphlets thrown on it. No doubt, the Israeli flag stuck on the edge of the table attracts them. By exhibiting it, we hope to show that it is possible to be friends of Israel while engaging in debate in a spirit of respect and anti-racism. Five, ten, and then about twenty people gather around us. A Swedish human rights activist asks me how I have the nerve to stand here and try to raise awareness of the ravages of antisemitism while thousands of Palestinians die every day.

I introduce myself as a European. I am not Israeli, but I have a close, intimate relationship with this country. The history of my people lives on every street corner there. I am a friend of Israel, but I do not always approve of the policies of its leaders. Yes, the Palestinians live in devastating conditions, which is truly

shameful for all. I explain that I am not here to discuss the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. My role here is to examine the scourge of racism and to raise awareness of one of its many variants, antisemitism. “Murderer,” she exclaims in front of curious onlookers who cheer her. “Haven’t you ever set foot in Gaza?” she asks, closely pointing her finger at my face.

My Jewish friends come to see what is going on. They start talking to the circle gathering around. In a few seconds, our stand is surrounded by people. NGO representatives abandon their own stands and rush to be part of the excitement. It’s as if nothing else but our wretched table existed in the middle of the fair. As if giving an opinion on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict was more pressing than any other cause. Everyone shouts louder to be heard. The accusations become radical. “Israel is committing genocide!” shouts a woman. Dozens of Palestinian flags are raised and float over our table forming a rainbow of green, red, white, and black pieces of cloth in the sky. Who just hung them up?

A whole crowd is now surrounding us. People begin shouting: “You should not be allowed to have a stand! You Jews, you have become racists!” Some cry. Others say nothing, but stare at us with contempt. TV camera crews and radio journalists approach us from all sides. Click. A photo is taken. Can we interview you later on? Frankly, we have no clue how to react to all of this. We try to hold the attention of the one person facing us to at least initiate a real exchange amid the chatter from all sides. Who is wrong, Sharon or Arafat? Who suffers more, Palestinians or Israelis? The questions don’t make any sense. But if these are the questions that make the crowds so furious, if we are touching the heart of what causes so much pain and humiliation, if we have pushed the button or pressed the “central nerve system” that ignites the frustration of Palestinian sympathizers, then this taboo needs to be broken. We *must* talk about the politics of it all! Even if we hadn’t come to Durban to discuss the conflict between Palestinians and Israelis, let’s do it, because that

is the only way we can start to have a real dialogue. Hopefully, once we find a common ground, recognize the other's suffering, and manage to get across a fragile message of peace and hope, perhaps we can then discuss racism.

But two hours later, a hundred people begin marching past us, holding an enormous Palestinian flag at arm's length. "*Ya'il Allah! Ya'il Allah!*" Then another hundred come out of nowhere. They gather, dotting the horizon with black, white, green, and red kaffiyehs. In less than ten minutes, they are 300, then 400. "Stop killing our children," they cry. Others brandish a banner: "Hector Peterson, Mohammed al-Dura: Twin victims of Apartheid." While singing, some burn an Israeli flag. You'd think you were in Gaza. "Free, free Palestine!"

They turn toward us. "Us" meaning a dozen young twenty-somethings encircling a two-meter wooden table! For some of the conference participants who were obviously bored, this is the highlight of the day. Joining the crowd, they seize banners to testify against injustice and denounce the Jewish fascists. It turns into one of those scenes you see every day on television: a clamoring crowd waving burning flags, brandishing their fists in the air, and remonstrating with security guards, who in turn place themselves in front of our table to prevent the crowd from excessive gestures. When you watch one of these televised scenes, comfortably seated in your cozy living room in Europe, you wonder what could have brought about such a climate of revolt. But here, this anger results from our presence. The demonstrators point their fingers at us. We are at the origin of these scenes. These images are broadcast that evening on all the international television channels.

Why do we represent a threat in their eyes? They are hundreds, we are a dozen! We begin laughing nervously at the absurdity of the situation. Good Lord, why is so much importance granted to us? The conference has barely started. Nobody takes any action. Some grumble in a low voice: "Oh, again the Jews and Arabs!"

2 PM: A man approaches Joav: “You have no right to exist, and we shall get you!”

2:30 PM: We are handing out white T-shirts to the passersby. The front of the T-shirt bears a blue Star of David with the symbol of peace and love inside. On the back is written, “Fight against racism, not against Jews,” followed by the message of Martin Luther King, Jr.: “When people criticize Zionism, they mean the Jews.” Dozens of African women and children are wearing them.

3 PM: Durban is above all a war of images and slogans. People boast about how it is they who suffer the most. They shout the loudest to be heard. They march through the stadium so that the press takes an interest in their cause. We did not play that game at the outset. But once attacked, we are faced with a choice: Either remove our badges and return home, or defend ourselves with our voices and our banners in the middle of the crowd. We too begin hanging slogans from our stand. We raise them in the morning, noon, and evening: “World Conference Advocating Racism, Youth Summit, Useless Summit! Stop terror and violence, UNbalanced Conference.”

4 PM: Journalists stop by to interview us. The cameras begin filming just so they are ready if a new commotion starts.

4:30 PM: The so-called rabbis appear again, striding from one stand to another, chatting with journalists, protesting when one of us speaks, proudly raising their “Jews against Zionism” posters in the anti-Israel demonstrations. They belong to a small sect, the Neturei Karta, who believe that the existence of the State of Israel constitutes a sin. They attend the conference as Iranian delegates though they are in no way from Iran. Despite their ultra-Orthodox dress, they nevertheless violate religious precepts by carrying their banners during the Sabbath, which is forbidden by Jewish law. They interrupt working sessions, charge toward the podiums, and hold up signs stating, “Israel does not represent world Jewry. End Zionist occupation and oppression now.”

They are welcomed by a burst of applause. What a show! African Zionists and antisemitic rabbis are running along each other!

At first, we believe it's all a huge joke. We can hardly decide if the situation is amusing, sad, or scandalous. The German television network ZDF attempts to interview one of them to get a "Jewish perspective on the Durban event." Julian explains that in no way do they represent the Jewish people.

END OF THE DAY: Daphné and Diane are walking to and from, irritated by not accomplishing anything constructive. They are fed up with explaining themselves. Let us do something positive. They contact a representative of the AFSC Roma Youth Delegation from Europe, an NGO that fights for the recognition of the rights of Romani people in Central Europe. They offer to co-draft a declaration. The idea is to bring together two minorities and exchange best practices for fighting discrimination in Europe. We hope to recall our common history—the genocide committed by the Nazis, called the *Shoah* by the Jews and the *Porajmos* by the Roma—to create networks for better coordination in our educational work, and to organize common public information campaigns. Jewish and Romani delegates meet repeatedly; we listen to one another, discuss, and work on a joint statement. We present the final version to our respective organizations. Our student union plans to organize a press conference to show that the work in Durban can be constructive. But the representative of AFSC must still sign off on the final text. Diane and Daphné are called into a meeting. "Sorry, we cannot participate in this project anymore," the Romani representative says meekly. But good Lord, why not? This is nothing more than a typical project carried out between youth organizations. No controversy here. Just a positive message between two European minorities, coupled with a basic commitment to work together! "Sorry, we received some advice not to work with you." Diane and Daphné would find out the true reason a little while later: "We support the Palestinian cause. If we work with you, all the NGOs will shut

the door in our faces. Furthermore, we need to think about our safety here in Durban,” he explains, his glance downcast.

All of our projects are shot down at the root. What’s the use of getting involved?

6 PM: Julian goes to the working session on “Colonialism, Foreign Occupation, Palestinians, and New Forms of Apartheid.” He recognizes a bunch of new friends who represent the indigenous populations of Colombia and Ecuador. They had met earlier, stumbling across one another’s paths in the airport, waiting for the plane to Durban. At the boarding gate in Charles de Gaulle International Airport at 3 a.m. in the morning, our two groups began chatting about music, books, and art. Some of them were strumming a guitar; others were speaking about their journeys to Latin America. On the plane, we promised to discover the nightlife of Durban together, go out, drink some beers, and tour the local bars. Delighted to see them again, Julian greets them. The debate in the room is focused on Israel. Again, the Jewish state is being depicted as the last fascist bastion to be isolated from the international community. The merry band from the airport is applauding. “Too bad! I thought that they, at least, didn’t care about Jews,” Julian laughs to himself. “Listen, my friend, Israel is attempting to promote slavery,” his musical buddies say to him. Julian tries to convince them to the contrary but gives up. He feels such a rift between them that he leaves them to their certitudes and convictions.

This seemingly futile episode raises a pressing question: What limits do political beliefs impose upon social relations? When you overhear discussions fraught with prejudice in your local café, do you brush them aside and carry-on chitchatting with no embarrassment? How can young Jews tackle the Middle East conflict since the Second Intifada? What do we do when we form friendships with people whose ethics, outlook, and ideals oppose everything we believe in? Can we connect on a deeper level with those who disregard some of our own fears? More and more, people tell me that Jews run the world, that

Ariel Sharon was more dangerous than Saddam Hussein. How do we cope with that? Do we always choose when and how to engage in a debate we feel intimately invested in—or do circumstances choose for us more often than we'd like to admit?

Thursday, August 30TH

9-11 AM: A typical morning: roaming the stands, reacting, getting worked up, speaking until we get booed, protesting by holding a solitary poster in a session in which Jews are being criticized, giving an interview to a radio station that grants us 90 seconds, ignoring the insults as we enter one room and leave to another. We begin to worry about the disappearance of a Jewish colleague who's been missing since the morning. Where is he? Sensing the anger of passersby who bump into us, while noticing that many other participants are flirtatiously joking and arranging social events for the evening...

We don't even go to the bar or the bathroom alone anymore. We now always ask a delegate to accompany us. Not because we have received instructions to do so, but because we are really afraid of strolling alone in the enclosure of the stadium. Certain members of the group are no longer wearing their badges. Others have exchanged their *kippas* for baseball caps.

11:30 AM: It's time for one of the many meetings of the European caucus. The aim is to bring together a maximum number of European participants to review common interests that they will collectively defend. Always on the alert, ready to jump up at the first provocation, my nerves are electric. I slip into the tent with my friends from the European Union of Jewish Students. How quiet it is here!

Everybody is speaking in low, respectful tones. Seated in a circle, each delegate takes a turn to speak, one at a time. The speakers explain how

the final text from Durban will be applied in their national action programs, how to urge their governments to take on more initiatives. They outline each country's specific weaknesses in the field of discrimination and discuss how to coordinate more work at a European level. Not a single word on the "taboo question"—the Middle East. Besides, Europeans in general are proud to distance themselves from this controversy, to keep their cool and stimulate constructive exchanges between delegates without breaking the harmony of the group. In these first days in Durban, the Europeans are conducting their affairs in a proper manner. *Business as usual.*

It could have given us a feeling of comfort. But the bubble in which the Europeans have cozied up is so far from our reality that we cannot identify with their concerns. The Europeans are pretending that the anarchy surrounding them does not exist. Our feeling of isolation, our vulnerability, and our increasing cynicism prevent us from doing what the others are doing. No time to talk. We are in a state of constant emergency. Diplomacy is no longer an option when one is parachuted onto a battlefield.

NOON: The Jewish caucus decides to hold a press conference with two objectives. First, to denounce the antisemitic literature circulating across the stadium. Secondly, to expose to the media the atmosphere in which we feel constantly harassed. We invite journalists using the theme, "You're not a racist, right?" The situation deteriorates to the point that an official session on "Holocaust Revisionism," which was to be held in the Jewish club, had to be cancelled for security reasons. The press takes seats inside a tent. According to those in charge of security, it is "the least likely place where we could be physically attacked."

Before our representatives finish their introductory remarks, a group of demonstrators, some provided with press passes, suddenly storm into the room. They approach the speakers, speaking incomprehensible gibberish in

front of the cameras. For security reasons, the press conference is interrupted. Our press conference is being taken hostage. No journalist has the opportunity to ask a single question.

2 PM: In a discussion devoted to “Hate Crimes, Hate Groups, Ethnic Cleansing, Conflict, and Genocide,” a Jewish delegate from Uruguay takes the floor. As he identifies himself, the session chair, a Palestinian, interrupts him: “This is a discussion about victims, and you are not a victim, sir.”

2:30 PM: Our time to take the floor finally arrives: the debate dedicated to antisemitism. This is the chance to clarify things. Each minority considered to be a victim of racism has the opportunity to tell its story and to share it with the others. According to the rules of the conference—one of the few that seem to be applied effectively—the victims of a particular form of racism have the right to share their experiences without other groups trying to rewrite their version of the facts. A group of experts explain the historical roots of antisemitism and then detail its contemporary forms. There is more and more noise in the room. People call for silence. Suddenly a few dozen participants abruptly enter the tent and gather around the entrance as if to block off access. The background noise forces the speakers to break off. From time to time, the Jewish participants stand up in protest: “Listen to the experts! Please respect the speakers!”

The discussion quickly shifts from its objectives. In the room, some stand up: “After the *Shoah*, how can you inflict on the others the same suffering that you have been subjected to?” They criticize the Jews, former victims who, as soon as they were freed, became executioners. Revisionists are also in the room. They have come “to correct” or rewrite history. For them, the belief that six million Jews perished in the Holocaust is pure fiction. The Jewish lobby invents these kinds of stories in order to inflict guilt upon the entire world. It is a conspiracy meticulously designed to make the world acquiesce to the Jewish desire to dominate the globe.

Other voices in the audience assert that any Israeli action against the Palestinians must be considered an “antisemitic act.” They call for condemnation of “the Israeli antisemitism practiced against the Palestinians.” Moreover, Arabs are also Semites and thus must appear among the victims of the Holocaust and be compensated, they exclaim. This implies that the Jew not only colonized Palestine, but worse, colonized words and concepts by appropriating the term “antisemitism.” Such antisemitism is expressed through semantics, where history is reinvented through the appropriation of terminology.

Right at this moment, dozens of people behind the entrance mount an assault. They storm into the tent and scream at the top of their lungs: “You are all murderers! You have Palestinian blood on your hands!” They approach us as we gather at the center of the room around the table where the panelists are seated. Panic drives some to run away. “You don’t belong to the human race!” “Chosen people? You are cursed people! I won’t speak to you, as long as you do not remove this thing,” a man yells at David, who is wearing a *kippa*.

The assault continues. “Why haven’t the Jews taken responsibility for killing Jesus? They have sucked our blood, all these years. We don’t want you here. Jews don’t belong in Jordan. Jews don’t belong in Israel.” “I believe in a Jewish state ... on Mars!” “Sharon, Golda Meir... They are all the same. We cannot convince Sharon to be a human being.”

The anger against us can no longer be contained. We have no refuge. The violence becomes physical, and all that is left for us to do is to run away.

As panic invades the workshop, I rush out on the lawn. I’m suffocating. I need a breathing space to pull myself together ... and not cry in front of everybody. Around me, I can hear echoes of speeches inside the surrounding tents of other working sessions. I position myself near one of these tents, and I light a cigarette. I will grab five minutes before returning to the chaos. A young man of Arab origin stares at me and tries to attract my attention. As I get ready to

leave, he flashes me a huge smile. That feels so good, a big smile.

He introduces himself and wants to invite me out to drink some coffee. I start joking with him in Arabic. I feel close to Arab culture. My parents were born in Egypt and in Sudan, and they still express the culture they nurtured there—the language, the traditions, the Arabic sense of humor, and, of course, the delicious food. The smiling man hands me a pamphlet. The pamphlet calls for the liberation of Palestine, signed: “ Hamas.” What? Hamas is here? “ You are part of Hamas?” I murmur, almost to myself. “ *Aiwa*, yes,” he answers me. These guys blow themselves up in discotheques, cafes, and bus stops in Israel. “ Umm ... don’t you have any more copies?” I ask him, my voice trembling. This is surreal. I’m alone under a tent that shelters Hamas and Hezbollah representatives. In a UN conference against racism...

Friday, August 31ST

9 AM: The intergovernmental conference starts today. This is an opportunity for a protest against Israel, planned to be held between noon and 4 p.m. Thousands of people are expected to demonstrate throughout the city and pass in front of the Jewish club before arriving at the conference center, where negotiations between governments are set to begin.

We receive strict instructions not to approach the demonstrators. Nobody is allowed to return to the Jewish club. We must stay calm. We mustn’t wear our “ Fight against racism, not against Jews” T-shirts. Everyone must remain discreet and low-key, especially in the stadium. For the first time, we sense that our (Jewish) security team is quite tense. The day before, the security people in charge had held long meetings in low voices. We did not know what they were talking about. We discover that since our arrival, bodyguards have been following our every step at the stadium, to make sure that nothing threatens us.

The deserted stadium looks like an abandoned battlefield. There is almost an apocalyptic air of silence there. Three hundred tenacious Dalits continue to march past, as they would do every day.

10 AM: A journalist approaches Marta and me to ask us some questions. The cameras are rolling. We begin to talk about our personal experiences in Durban. A Palestinian girl begins to shout: “You’re lying, you’re lying.” Then, turning to the journalist, she says, with pleading eyes: “Let me give you my version of the facts.” Tears are pouring down her cheeks. I feel her pain. We begin to talk with her, without realizing that the camera is still on.

“We are not Israeli. Sharon is not our prime minister. We shall gladly speak about Palestinians during the speech that is dedicated to them. But this session is dedicated to antisemitism. For the time being, we have to formulate concrete recommendations for the United Nations Action Plan on the means to fight antisemitism.” “No, we cannot work out this text without speaking about Israel,” she concludes. End of discussion.

10 AM: The journalist breaks the silence: “Can we do another take, please?” “We are not on a movie set,” we reply sharply. Marta suspects it was all staged. “This Palestinian girl just wanted to cry in front of the camera. And the journalist is delighted by the show. Let’s get out of here,” she whispers to me in my ear. Marta’s nerves are sparking; she feels exploited each time she addresses the media. “Do you think that I am getting paranoid?” she wonders out loud.

10:30 AM: Diane is no longer wearing her badge when she roams alone in the stadium. A man approaches her, handing her a piece of paper. She reads it while walking: “Antisemitism is by definition a racist concept since it bases superiority on religion and the national scene.... Why should the demands of particular nationals or followers of a religion benefit from a privileged attention from the conference? Does the whole world need to bear the burden of the

Third Reich?” The pamphlet is signed “Revolution Committees Movement.” Diane retraces her steps and asks the man, who is wearing a Libyan badge, for whom he is working. “I know who you are,” he says to her, his eyes full of hatred. “I know what you’re doing here, and I don’t want to talk with you.”

At the beginning of the NGO Forum, we were stigmatized as a group. Now our faces are being recognized. We are being followed at times. Are some of these people in charge of watching us and others sent to protest? Our fear of being physically threatened did not just fall from the sky. This fear, and to a certain extent paranoia, resulted from the accumulation of the many different experiences we all lived through. Whether it is true or not, we feel watched everywhere by “faceless” people.

1 PM: With greatest caution, we catch a cab to the Belgian Embassy. Belgium is the country that holds the rotating presidency of the European Union. A cocktail party is organized in honor of the European diplomats present at the conference. The European Union of Jewish Students is invited to meet Louis Michel, the Belgian Minister of Foreign Affairs.

Louis Michel has dedicated an entire hour to us while a crowd of people rush to speak to him. We sit down around a table near the swimming pool of the villa. We show the minister all the antisemitic pamphlets that have circulated at the Youth Summit and the NGO Forum. Some showered Hitler with praise; others portrayed the Jews with big noses spitting out blood. Then, we give him copies of the threatening letters that were sent to the Jewish community of Durban, and we share some personal anecdotes. The minister is genuinely shocked. He makes copies of these documents—and assures us that he will denounce their hateful contents during a press conference several days later. The mere fact that he devotes so much of his time to us shows how seriously he interprets the series of events.

To reach a final agreement on the intergovernmental text, it will be necessary to untangle the tensions resulting from the Israeli-Palestinian conflict before tackling the question of reparations for slavery. Only by addressing both issues would a consensus be possible. What is the first thing to do? To calm the concerns of the U.S. and Israel so that they will not use the singling out of Israel throughout the conference as an excuse to slam the door and leave. And to that end, from a European perspective, it is advisable to strongly condemn the acts of hatred to which the Jewish participants were subjected. It is the honest intent of Louis Michel to face these responsibilities and listen to our testimony.

From the outset, the minister understands the hostility directed at us. He virulently condemns antisemitism. We remind him, for the sake of clarity, that there is a difference between Jews and Israelis. Jews are seen, in the collective consciousness of Durban, as the direct cause of Palestinian suffering. We are considered the last bastion of a fascist international order to be eliminated. Restoring the dignity of oppressed people will only come through our defeat.

We explain to the minister that we are visiting him as Europeans. It is the very first time we have been assaulted for being Jews, and we are counting on Europe to raise its voice against these distortions. We explain that Durban is the perfect opportunity for the European Union to demonstrate its commitment to a strong common foreign policy in line with its values. We are proud to be Europeans because every day at this conference, we understand a little better the common values shared by all Europeans: our reading of history, our respect for words, history, and semantics, and our respect for diversity.

Our discussion with Louis Michel ends. The minister, seeing that we appreciate his warm and comforting comments, adds a last sentence by way of conclusion: "Between us, I personally have a lot of difficulty with Sharon. To my big regret, I am afraid that his actions foster antisemitism." Louis Michel probes us deliberately, trying to discover what we think of the Sharon government,

as if he wants to ensure that we are not Zionist zealots. “So to be “good Europeans,” is it advisable to denounce Sharon’s political decisions, lest we lose some of our credibility?

This logic makes us uncomfortable. Michel’s remarks imply that if Israel followed a more clement policy toward the Palestinians, the excesses in Durban would not have occurred. But in our view, racism is a disease in itself. It is not the side effect of another disease: the policies of Sharon. To argue otherwise is to step on dangerous ground because it flirts with the theory that a chain of causalities can rationally explain antisemitism. Yet we are not here to discuss Sharon’s government. Each of us within the delegation has his own political views, often very different from the rest, on this matter. Louis Michel should speak to the Israeli diplomats if he has legitimate concerns regarding the renewal of violence in the region and the collapse of the peace process. We leave the meeting more confused than ever.

8 PM: The Youth Summit is about to close, and its declaration must be adopted. The youth delegates had already presented their declaration, but the adoption procedures turned out to be so vague that many groups are still disputing the final text. Nobody knows what to do to improve the situation. Each regional entity meets to add this word, remove that paragraph, and table last-minute amendments to the plenary session. Is this all in compliance with procedure? Nobody can answer us. It is impossible to know which amendments will be brought to the plenary session for adoption, or how their selection will be made. No paragraph is devoted to antisemitism. The term is curiously placed in a paragraph that begins with discrimination against Muslims. One would thus assume that antisemitism would apply to Muslims. What can we do faced with such a linguistic and historic distortion?

On the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the assembly rejects our proposal to “put an end to violence” and to encourage the resumption of peace negotiations

between the parties. Instead, the text grants the Palestinians the right to defend themselves “by any means” against the Israeli occupation. Would suicide attacks thus be justifiable as an instrument of self-defense?

Then and there, we know what we must do. We will be the first ones to boycott the conference.

As we move to the front stage of the room, we take over the microphone. “We cannot accept the inflammatory tone of this text,” declares Diane, in front of an unconcerned assembly. “We regret that the Youth Forum did not condemn the violence in the Middle East as well as all forms of incitement to hatred. We would have wished to call for a return to the negotiating table and a peaceful dialogue between Palestinians and Israelis.”

We are struck by the indifference in the room. Some individuals in kaffiyehs at least acknowledge our presence by booing us! But, perhaps because of our impending departure, the great majority do not care about our position on the Middle East, which is essentially a call for peace. It’s as if these young people, with whom we tried to build a dialogue during these days, casually said to themselves, “Ah, the Jews are leaving. So what! You win some, you lose some.” The audience continues to chitchat aimlessly. When Diane speaks, it’s as if a logistical announcement is being read in the background to instruct the participants to gather their belongings after the meeting because the bus will not return twice.

I snatch back the microphone: “We would also like to recall that throughout this conference, we have been offended, intimidated, and harassed.... We have never experienced racism before coming here.”

Some people started booing me. “You Jews are so paranoid that you only speak about yourselves.” “Stop being so egocentric; we too have already experienced racism. That’s why we are here!”

“Well, we are now going to proceed to vote: Who is in favor, who is against, who abstains?” the chairman casually states. Nobody tries to speak to us. It’s time to leave this wretched stadium.

Saturday, September 1ST

3 PM: At the NGO Forum, Fidel Castro delivers a closing speech that lasts several hours. We are not the only ones to find it ironic that a dictator is granted the honor of concluding the forum. The participants from the former Soviet bloc are furious. The organizers of the conference, SANGOCO, made this decision behind closed doors without informing the members of the steering committee.

6:30 PM: This is the first time that the fifty-eight members of the Jewish caucus are gathered at full strength in the stadium. The NGO Forum is about to adopt the final text of its declaration and the Action Program. Hundreds of people, representing forty-three caucuses, are gathered in the stadium to reach a final agreement. The closing meeting is chaotic. People stand up, moan and groan, shout, and threaten to leave. The steering committee decides to adopt the text, despite the fact that the regional caucuses have not yet reached a consensus.

8 PM: While we are nervously fidgeting in our seats, the chairman and members of the steering committee on the podium openly confront each other on the rules of procedure. They do not know how to manage the questioning and look at the audience with a pleading eye. The scene is ridiculous. One NGO asks if a caucus may present last-minute amendments. Reacting to the roars of the crowd, the chairman and the steering committee accept, “provided that there are new caucuses that present these amendments,” so that new associations may express their voices! To present

changes in the text, one must create a new group. Just like that, dozens of people rush toward the office to register new organizations, created on the spot!

The adoption of these new procedures is absurd, so why not live in this surrealistic state to its end? I queue up in line and invent a name for my fictitious organization. Let's definitely omit the word "Jewish." What about "Youth Movement against Racism"? It's the first name that comes to my mind. I am resolved to play the game, if it enables the Jewish caucus to modify the draft text.

Half an hour later, the chairman revokes his decision, seeing the chaos around him. Everybody sits back down. The debate begins. Each caucus has the right to take the floor and present a paragraph on the origins of its own discrimination, which will now be adopted by the entire forum. Finally, the plenary proceeds to adopt the text.

9:50 PM: The assembly votes to adopt the principle of the right of the victims to define their own form of discrimination. That way, each group victimized by racism will be able to freely express its objectives.

10 PM: Ten minutes after this key decision, an African delegate from the Ecumenical Caucus requests the elimination of our paragraph on antisemitism, which reads: "We are troubled by the prevalence of anti-Zionism and the attempts to delegitimize the State of Israel through the inept charge of genocide crimes, war crimes, crimes against humanity, ethnic cleansing, and apartheid, and by any acts which we consider as obvious forms of antisemitism including the burning of synagogues, the attacking of Jews, the incitement to murder innocent people because of their support for the existence of Israel, their assertion of the right for self-determination of the Jewish people, and the will through the State of Israel to protect their cultural and religious identity." Our text condemns manifestations of anti-Zionism, which in the previous year have led to incitement and violence against Jews and Jewish institutions worldwide.

“I am against antisemitism, but I am also against the genocide against the Palestinians,” the spokeswoman of the Ecumenical Caucus declares. A roar of applause. The president immediately calls for a yes or no on the deletion of this paragraph. Forty-two voters. In favor: thirty-nine. Against: Our yellow vote card solitarily floats over the crowd. At the time, nobody notices that the Central European caucus also raised its card, as did the representatives of the Romani caucus.

Following the signal of one of our Jewish colleagues, we all stand up to walk out of the room. Confusion reigns in our heads. The entire Jewish caucus begins shouting a slow but endless chant. “Shame. Shame. Shame. Shame. Shame. Shame.” These are our last words. We shout with all our might. We yell out against all the minutes we endured in Durban since our arrival. We roar our anger at the crowd, which remains startled in silence for a fraction of a second. Then the Palestinian caucus erupts with shouts of: “Free, Free Palestine!” One couldn’t hear anything but the juxtaposition of these two chants: “Shame, shame!” “Free, free Palestine!” As we leave the tent behind, we see people cheerfully hugging each other in a sign of victory. Others rush to take our empty seats.

We cross the stadium in a whirlwind. This is not the first time that we run for fear of being physically attacked. But this time, fifty- eight Jews are concentrated in one place. It’s dark, and the tension is at its peak. There is an air of panic in our movements. As for me, I’m afraid that people will follow us or even assault us! I see our bodyguards near us. “Walk quickly, together, straight ahead. Do not expect the bus to come and find you. Continue walking.” They are very tense.

12 AM: We discover afterward that the disorder only got worse. The session became increasingly chaotic and unmanageable. Procedure was not respected at all. Later in the evening, the Romani caucus got up and left the tent. They

would be the first ones to take the microphone and announce that they could not subscribe to the text, which was antisemitic.

The group from Central Europe did not immediately leave the room. They had fought hard to include a passage on the wars in the Balkans and Chechnya and they wanted to see it through until the end of the meeting. Into the middle of the night, the participants began laboriously voting on every paragraph.

It was hot and raining and there was nothing to eat. When somebody brought some sandwiches, a Russian delegate of Jewish origin, a member of the Central European group, was asked if he was “a friend of Palestine.” The experience was humiliating. Until he gave an answer, he could not get anything to eat. It was during that night that the group decided to draft a declaration to distance itself from the text.

In the early hours, the final text of the NGO Forum was adopted. Very few people stayed in the room. According to Miroslav Prokes, a member of the International Organizational Committee, the steering committee had the right to refuse ex post facto the illegal deletion of the paragraph on antisemitism. Yet instead of acknowledging that the rules of procedure had been violated, the steering committee drafted an explanatory text stating, “For various reasons, in this session, a different process emerged which had not been anticipated, but it does not necessarily mean a violation of the rules of procedure.”

Then, one of the biggest scandals of the conference in Durban took place.

Some members of the steering committee, accompanied by members of SANGOCO and delegates of the Palestinian caucus, barged into an office closed to the public where the drafting committee was finalizing the NGO text to integrate the adopted amendments. The invaders demanded editorial changes to the explanatory text, as well as modifications to the section on

antisemitism. The scene was violent. According to Prokes, after some attempts to have a discussion, the drafting committee felt so intimidated that it left the workroom. The intruders then took charge of the completion of the NGO document.

Nobody spoke about this incident to the press. Moreover, numerous participants left Durban the next day without ever having been aware of this episode.

In the final version of the NGO document, as published today, the definition of antisemitism is diluted to include discrimination against other people such as the Palestinians. Islamophobia is also considered a form of antisemitism. Besides, Israel is accused of “war crimes and of acts of genocide.” It is classified as a “racist nation,” and the text calls to apply to it “all the measures taken against the South African apartheid regime”—meaning an embargo and the suspension of all diplomatic, economic, and social ties. The document also calls for the launching of an international campaign against the apartheid movement in Israel “to break the silence of the Nations, in particular the European Union and the United States.” The NGO Declaration also calls for the restoration of UN Resolution 3379, equating Zionism with racism. Later, the high commissioner, Mary Robinson, announced that, for the first time in the history of the United Nations, she could not recommend the NGO document to the governments.

September 11TH

We are on planes all day. Durban-Johannesburg-Paris-Milan-Brussels.... I’m drenched in fatigue, but it’s impossible to sleep. The adrenalin is still flowing profusely. We feel as if we are returning from war. Welcome back to the lucid, peaceful, free world! There will be no more security concerns, no more

bodyguards, no drivers taking us to stadiums filled with groups of hateful imbeciles! What shall we do tomorrow? We dream of spending a lazy day in some of the nicest cafés in Brussels. Let's definitely not plunge into the world of radicalism, racism or the Middle East for a while—at least until we get our senses back....

But how are we going to share this story with our relatives and friends? What will we do with this experience?

We finally land in Brussels. Marta is coming to sleep at my house. As soon as we get through the door, we turn on the TV to unpack our bags to the upbeat rhythms of MTV. But the remote control persistently stops on CNN. "Live from the CNN Center in Atlanta, bringing you the story, a plane has just crashed into one of the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center. Stay with us and we'll continue our live coverage, after the break."

For me, as well as for all the Jews present in Durban, there is a clear connection between the attacks on the Twin Towers and the hatred we had experienced a few days earlier. We imagine a sort of world conspiracy. How could this chain of events not be linked? The madness of Durban had spread like a virus. After the alienation of the Jews, the entire globe will be disoriented. In Durban, all the ingredients were there: virulent anti-Americanism, hatred of the Jews, Islamist networks whose reach was yet unknown, and a clash between values. The collision of all these elements could change the world in which we live.

My second spontaneous reaction followed. I imagine the faces of the Hamas and Hezbollah representatives who were freely distributing their pamphlets at the stadium. "Well, obviously," I admit to myself in a blasé tone, "if these guys can march past the nose of Mary Robinson and call for jihad at the UN, then why couldn't others hijack a plane?"

September 12TH

Final scene. The newsstand in front of my house.

After the attacks of September 11th, I hurry to buy a newspaper before the special editions are sold out. I wait in line at the shop. A Belgian of African origin is chatting with the salesman behind the counter. They are discussing Durban and 9/11. “After all, what happened to those Americans is well deserved! The Americans are racists because they boycotted a world conference against racism. No wonder, we are all going to attack racists,” he adds, satisfied with his analysis. The salesman chuckles. These are the first words, the first spontaneous reactions that I hear upon my return to Brussels. Then they change topics and share the latest gossip of the neighborhood.

Join AJC in our efforts to counter and confront all forms of antisemitism and anti-Zionism.

To take part in AJC’s advocacy efforts urging nations to not attend the UN’s September 2021 Durban commemoration event, and for continually updated information about the Durban conference’s impact on the spread of antisemitism and more, go to [AJC.org/Durban](https://www.ajc.org/Durban)

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