

US Will Not Take Part In UN Racism Conference: Officials

Written by Rudi Prinsloo
Sunday, 01 March 2009 00:32 -



The United States has decided against taking part in a UN-led conference on racism after it quit the previous session in 2001 over claims of anti-Semitism, US officials said.

"We're not going to further engage in Durban II," a senior State Department official told AFP on the condition of anonymity, referring to the conference scheduled for 20-24 April in Geneva.

A US delegation took part in the preparatory talks in Geneva on February 16 and made proposed changes to a resolution expected to be adopted at the conference, which Canada and Israel have said they would boycott.

According to a statement issued by State Department spokesman Robert Wood later Friday, the "document being negotiated has gone from bad to worse, and the current text of the draft outcome document is not salvageable.

"As a result, the United States will not engage in further negotiations on this text, nor will we participate in a conference based on this text," he said.

"A conference based on this text would be a missed opportunity to speak clearly about the persistent problem of racism."

The previous team of George W. Bush had said last year it would not assist in the preparatory discussions, but new President Barack Obama's administration sent a delegation to look at whether its participation is warranted.

"The intent of our participation is to work to try to change the direction in which the Review Conference is heading," according to a State Department statement issued earlier this month.

A second US official said on the condition of anonymity that his government had tried to find a way to participate. "We made an honest effort," the official said.

The conference was first held in Durban, South Africa a few days before the September 11, 2001 attacks on the United States, and against the backdrop of the second Palestinian intifada.

Israel and the United States walked out on the fourth day of the conference in protest against attempts by Arab nations to adopt a resolution that equates Zionism with racism.

The second US official said the United States had been interested in a document that was shorter than the one eight years ago and would not single out a particular country.

"We would be prepared to consider a document that contains an affirmative approach to race and laid out a positive vision for tackling the challenges," the official said.

"It would not reaffirm the elements of the 2001 Durban Declaration and Program of Action

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(DDPA), would not contain specific references to any one country or a single conflict," according to the official.

The document "would not reference to the problematic concept of defamation of religion, and would not go further than the DDPA on the issue of reparations for slavery," the official added.

The Conference of Presidents, an umbrella group of more than 50 Jewish organizations, applauded the US move.

"It was clear from the preparatory meetings that this conference was again being hijacked by those who want to have a repetition of the first Durban conference, which focused almost singularly on Israel and was the occasion for vile and bigoted declarations and anifestations," it said in a statement.

"It is our hope that the European countries will follow suit and announce that they will not participate."

The United Jewish Communities also hailed the decision.

"As feared, it has become increasingly clear that the only purpose of the Durban conference is to condemn the State of Israel for its very existence," the group ssaid. "President Obama is absolutely correct in refusing to participate in this sham."

Source : Sapa-AFP /clh
Date : 28 Feb 2009 10:27