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RACISM AND HIGH COMMISSIONER FOR HUMAN RIGHTS

RECEPTION OFFERED IN HER HONOUR BY
THE SOUTH AFRICAN HUMAN RIGHTS COMMISSION
EDWARD HOTEL, 30 AUGUST 2001, 1900H

Excellencies, Chairman of the South African Human Rights Commission, National Institutions representatives and colleagues,

I am pleased to see so many of you here in Durban to attend the World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance. I wish to thank the Government of South Africa for hosting this landmark event, bringing together in our common cause people from all over the world. The hard work of the South African Human Rights Commission, in co-operation with my Office, is also very much appreciated.

Many of you have heard me speak about the important role you have to play in this Conference and its follow-up. When I addressed you at various recent meetings, including your Fifth International Meeting in Rabat and the International Co-ordinating Committee in Geneva, I stressed the importance of national institutions in effective preparations for this gathering. Not only have many of you demonstrated your commitment to ensuring practical results from this Conference by attending the various expert seminars and preparatory meetings, I have been particularly impressed by the national initiatives you have undertaken. Examples include the launch of national plans to combat discrimination in Malawi; public consultations on racism and xenophobia as in Australia; the establishment of an anti-racism task force as in the Andean Region; the recently held seminar in Fiji with its very practical conclusions; and the important work undertaken by the Danish Centre for Human Rights concerning effective responses. I have been pleased to be able to support these initiatives, with the help of generous grants given us by the Rockefeller and Carnegie Foundations.

You have just concluded a pre-Conference meeting of national human rights institutions in another great South African city, Johannesburg. From this meeting your draft Declaration, which I understand you will finalise shortly, is forward looking, clearly highlighting your role in the Conference but also in the much-needed action, which must follow it. I encourage you to use this Declaration to enrich proposals already on the table to ensure that both the Programme of Action and the Conference Declaration gives us a strategic vision to the future.

Your efforts have helped ensure that the preparations for the World Conference have already provided a positive result. This has, however, not been an easy process as we re-examine old problems and search for solutions to present and enduring ones. I was recently asked whether such discussions have only exacerbated

tensions and discord. This is not so; it is silence and inaction which create tensions and frustration. The process involving this Conference, including the preparations and follow-up, is a healing one and also a preventive one.

In this first World Conference dealing with racism in the post-Apartheid era, we require action at both the national and international levels. We must strive to recognise the scars that colonialism and exploitation have left. While much focus has been on the past there are many pressing challenges facing us which I know many of you confront on a daily basis in your work.

As discussions evidenced through your own pre-Conference meeting, the NGO Forum, and the Global Compact initiative of tomorrow highlight, action is not only required from States but also non-State actors. At a time of globalisation the responsibility of the private sector and international financial organisations requires concerted responses from them as well as States, national institutions and civil society.

Tomorrow the World Conference will commence its deliberations, in which national institutions are recognised by your accreditation as observers. Central to this Conference are dignity, fraternity, equality and solidarity – with a view to giving new impetus and finding new strategies to combat racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance.

I encourage you to attend the Plenary, take your place in the list of speakers, add value to the discussions of the two Working Groups, and participate as actively as possible in the rich variety of parallel events which my Office and its partners have organised. All discussions through to the 7th of September will be important ones.

We must all recommit ourselves to the struggle against racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance. I look forward to your important contribution and our increased co-operation and thank you for the contribution you have already made to ensuring this Conference will have practical results. However, Durban is only the beginning – it is the follow-up above all which counts and National Institutions have a vital role to play in this.

Thank you.