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Smith should avoid racist conference

Alan Gold | The Australian | 26 February

The 120th anniversary of Hitler's birth falls on April 20, which coincidentally is the day nations will gather in Geneva under the banner of the UN to discuss ways of dealing with the growth of racism.

The Durban Review Conference was established to evaluate the progress made towards the goals set by the first World Conference Against Racism held in Durban, South Africa, in August 2001.

It was a worthy topic that should have made for a worthy conference in which to debate how the world should react to the pernicious forces of racial and religious hatred, cancers that ruin the lives and security of millions of people. But as so often happens with the world body, the exhilarating promise proved to be very different from the deadening reality.

Durban I was a notorious hate-filled gathering that devolved into one of the most racist and prejudiced meetings in the UN's history. Its anti-Semitism and anti-Israel agenda and hysterical crowds of extremists still send shudders of horror through the corridors of human rights organisations. This is why many nations, especially from the West, are considering boycotting Durban II which, like Durban I, is likely to become a platform for anti-Semitism and anti-Western xenophobia and hatred.

Like its predecessor, Durban II has been appropriated by nations that have scant regard for human rights, and whose anti-Western and anti-Israel stance has made the UN Human Rights Council into a forum for the evils it was created to oppose.

As one of the small number of Australian delegates in Durban eight years ago, I witnessed some of the most egregious anti-Semitic propaganda, speeches and decisions since World War II.

So bad was the venality, so biased the organisers, so effete the UN secretariat running the conference that the US delegation walked out in disgust halfway through.

This time it is shaping up to be even worse. How could this conference not be antipathetic to human rights when Libya, Iran, Sudan and other members of the Organisation of the Islamic Conference are using the gathering in Geneva to demonise Israel, give official credence to Holocaust denial and legislate against freedom of speech?

Using the catch-all phrase of Islamophobia, the OIC is attempting to deny nations the right to criticise extremism and violence.

Canada and Israel are so appalled at the agenda for this hate-fest that they have already announced their intention of boycotting.

Officials in a growing number of European nations also have expressed their concern about attendance and giving legitimacy to the way in which the UNHRC has manipulated the agenda.

The Obama administration has said it will attend the preparations for the UN's Durban Review, but this must be viewed as a dangerous move. Obviously with wider implications than just the conference itself, the US has decided to participate because of its desire to show that it will extend

an open hand rather than a clenched fist towards Iran and the Arab world.

This is a high-risk gambit. If the US does manage to shift the focus away from Islamic hatred of Israel, and turn the spotlight on to the pressing religious and racial discrimination across the world, US influence will be boosted. But what if this policy fails? And where does Australia fit into the scheme of things?

Foreign Minister Stephen Smith hasn't yet announced whether Australia will attend the review in Geneva. Much is at stake.

Australia is a leading contender for a non-permanent seat on the UN Security Council and boycotting may affect how we are viewed at the tables of the world body. But with many countries, especially the 27 members of the European Union, seriously considering boycotting, Australia may find itself compromised as it sits in the middle of another conference as notorious as Durban I.

The 2009 agenda of the Geneva conference must give Smith cause for concern. And surely he must be influenced by the fact Islamic nations continue to insist that Islamophobia is in a special category and must not be allowed under national laws.

But the very idea of censorship in democratic nations is the antithesis of Australian values. We should play no part in this conference.

[Alan Gold is a novelist and was a delegate at the 2001 UN World Conference Against Racism]

America, look behind you! Turn around! Turn around!

Barry Rubin | The Jerusalem Post | 23 February

America: A freight train is heading your way and you're standing right on the tracks, looking in the wrong direction.

Or perhaps it is like a horror film in which the killer sneaks up behind the hapless victim while the movie audience yells: "Turn around! Turn around!" And then blood spatters the screen.

Unfortunately, in this case, it might be *our* blood, and it won't be produced by a special effects department.

Today, US policy and the dominant thinking are not based on realpolitik but on international affairs as a popularity contest. Its motto might be, "The nice will inherit the Earth," as the Obama administration tries to prove that it's not like that mean old Bush.

Before we get to the oncoming train, consider two small but indicative examples.

Scene 1: The UN committee planning the Durban-2 pro-racism - I mean "anti-racism" - conference. Libya chairs the committee, Iran is the vice-chair, Cuba, the rapporteur, and Russia is presiding. The plan is designed to ensure that the conference limits free speech, bashes Israel and enshrines Muslims as the world's only and perpetual victims.

The US representative stands to propose amendments. Is the speech a thunderous denunciation of dictatorship and a defense of liberty? Not exactly. Here is the key sentence: "I hate to be the cause of unhappiness in the room... I have to suggest [amendments] and I offer my sincere apologies."

How's that for speaking softly and carrying a big pillow? (US president Theodore Roosevelt a century ago famously described diplomacy as "speaking softly and carrying a big stick.")

Scene 2: The camera pans and the screen fills with an invitation to a conference being held by the Brookings Institution in Washington. The purpose is defined as asking, "How should Europe engage

Russia to put relations between the West and Russia on a more positive and sustainable basis?" There is no room for pressure, opposition or criticism as part of the package; no hint of the need for flexibility to be accompanied by toughness.

Russia invaded Georgia, fought a surrogate war against Azerbaijan, blackmailed Ukraine and Lithuania. It has opposed sanctions on Iran, sold huge amounts of arms to Syria and committed real human rights' violations in Chechnya. It is the dawning of the age not of Aquarius (as the film Hair once said of the utopia predicted in the 1960s) but of Aquarium, in which the sharks are put in charge.

US policy is putting the emphasis on conciliation with Iran and Syria, and a soft line toward Pakistan, despite its lack of cooperation on fighting terrorism against India or in Afghanistan.

The only thing you can do with a strategy of carrots without sticks is to make carrot cake. Now consider what is sneaking up on the US government as it hands out candy:

On March 29, local elections will be held in Turkey. If the current government wins these municipal races, especially in Ankara and Istanbul, the country will be encouraged to go even further down the road toward Islamic extremism. Whatever happens internally (where the nature of Turkish society forces it to go more slowly), Ankara's foreign policy is increasingly aligned with that of the radicals in the region - not only Hamas but also Syria and Iran.

Turkey's many friends are hoping that moderation and its traditional political virtues win out. But what's happening there may well be the most important political event in the Middle East since the Iranian revolution 30 years ago. Think of what it means if, in whole or even in part, Turkey goes from the Western to the radical camp; clearly this is a world-changing event.

Then on June 7 come the Lebanese elections. Given the vast amounts of money they have spent, their use of violent intimidation and demoralization due to the Western abandonment of the moderates, it is likely that Iran's Syrian clients will take over Lebanon's government. This does not mean domination by Hizbullah but by four allied forces: pro-Syrian Sunni politicians; Michel Aoun's Christian forces; and the two Shi'ite groups, Hizbullah and Amal.

Already, Lebanon's president and former armed forces' commander Michel Suleiman is very close to the Iran-Syrian orbit. This doesn't mean that Lebanon will be annexed or militarily reoccupied by Syria, or that Lebanon will become an Islamist state internally. But it *does* mean that Lebanon will become a reliable ally of what Syrian President Bashar Assad calls "the resistance front."

In the region, these two developments will be perceived as two big victories for Teheran, and a sign that the Islamist-radical side is the wave of the future.

And what is the United States doing to fight, stop or manage this visible crisis? Nothing.

Finally, on June 12, presidential elections will take place in Iran itself. The likelihood is the re-election of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, either fairly or through manipulation of the ballot. The Iranian ruling establishment, which might have been persuaded to endorse a less extreme candidate if there had been enough Western pressure to make the incumbent look bad, has backed an openly aggressive anti-Semite.

Even though Ahmadinejad is not the real ruler of Iran, he and his allies are working to make him so. And of course his re-election means not only that Iran is waging a campaign to get nuclear weapons, it will mean that it is moving at the fastest possible speed, with the least likelihood of compromising and the most probability of using such a weapon (or forcing Israel to act militarily to stop the process). By years' end, or shortly after, Iran might have an atom bomb.

In short, 2009 is looking like a year of massive defeat for the US and its friends in the Middle East. Meanwhile, Washington is blind to this trend, pursuing a futile attempt to conciliate its enemies, losing time and not adopting the policies desperately needed.

Instead, the US should make itself leader of a broad coalition of Arab and European states, along with Israel, to resist Islamism and Iranian ambitions.

Alas, the new administration is fooling around while the region burns.
Turn around! Turn around!

[The writer is director of the Global Research in International Affairs Center at IDC Herzliya and editor of the Middle East Review of International Affairs Journal]

Anti-Semitism: Combating a global pandemic

Abraham H. Foxman | JTA | 22 February

Coming just weeks after the explosion of global anti-Semitism that followed Israel's military action in Gaza, the timing couldn't have been better for the London Conference on Combating Anti-Semitism, held Feb. 16 and 17. With Jewish communities around the world feeling insecure and vulnerable, with synagogues vandalized and an atmosphere of intimidation and fear permeating anti-Israel rallies, there was a sense that even though this conference had been months in the making, it was a propitious moment for deliberation and action.

Having just returned from the London meeting, where I chaired a working group on fighting anti-Semitism in the political sphere, I can say that there is at least a sliver of hope that these challenges can be met, that there is a willingness and a commitment by some in the international community who are ready to stand up and say "no" to anti-Semitism, and to put up a united front against bigotry and hatred.

More than 120 lawmakers from more than 40 nations spanning the globe came together to devise an effective framework and forge new strategies to confront anti-Semitism on a global scale. This is the good news in an otherwise bleak picture, one that I fear is only going to get bleaker as world Diaspora Jewry faces this new threat.

Although the conference was planned months ago to deal with the growing and increasingly sophisticated manifestations of global anti-Semitism, it clearly took on much greater significance as a result of the pandemic of anti-Semitism that erupted during Israel's Gaza offensive. As it happens, the Gaza reaction became the main focus of our discussions.

Let's take a moment to revisit what happened in the weeks after Israel launched the Gaza offensive on Dec. 27.

It was as if the floodgates had been opened. Within days an open season had been declared on world Jewry. It started with criticism of Israel: Israel was wrong. Israel was evil. Israel was satanic and a violator of international human rights and international law. This theme quickly morphed into talk about war crimes and war tribunals.

In cities around the world, rhetoric at rallies and demonstrations against Israel reached a fever pitch with the most outrageous language imaginable and comparisons of Israelis and all Jews to Nazis, to Hitler, to swastikas. The language was unmistakable and ubiquitous -- the Star of David equals the swastika, the accusation that Gaza is the same as Auschwitz, the victims of the Holocaust are now the perpetrators of a new one. The shouts of "Jews to the Gas" -- shamelessly shouted in public, even in Fort Lauderdale, Fla. -- spread quickly across the Internet along with much worse expressions of hatred for Israel and Jews.

Jewish communities felt pressure as never before. In Venezuela, the community of nearly 15,000 woke up to a nightmare of anti-Semitic expression aided and encouraged by President Hugo Chavez and his government, who expelled the Israeli ambassador and called on Jewish Venezuelans to renounce their allegiance to Israel. In Caracas, a synagogue was vandalized in an orgy of anti-Semitism: the Torah scrolls thrown to the floor, the walls daubed with anti-Jewish epithets and threats, the membership rolls stolen. The Venezuelan media and Web sites were filled

with expressions of hatred for Israel and calls for Jews to be expelled from the country.

Venezuela was not an isolated case. Reports flooded in from Jewish communities around the world that were feeling similar pressures. European countries, including democratic, Western nations such as France, Belgium and Great Britain, witnessed an outpouring of hatred aimed at Jews. The hateful rhetoric at rallies often was followed by violence, sometimes by demonstrators, other times by unidentified perpetrators who aimed Molotov cocktails at synagogues and other visibly Jewish institutions and property.

This is why the word “pandemic” applies to what we are witnessing. Not only has it spread more widely than we have ever witnessed -- even during the second intifada, when Israel faced suicide bombings in the heart of Jerusalem, it was not this intense -- but it has metastasised with accusations of dual loyalty and Holocaust denial thrown into the mix.

This is the worst, the most intense, the most global hatred aimed at Jews in most of our memories. When was the last time we can remember Jews being beaten in the street, as happened in the United Kingdom, where 220 incidents were reported during the three weeks of Israel’s military operation, an eight-fold increase compared to the same period a year ago?

Likewise, in Amsterdam, Antwerp, Athens, Barcelona, Berlin, Caracas, Florence, Montevideo and Paris, Jews have been beaten on the street, synagogues have been firebombed and desecrated, and Jewish institutions, businesses and homes have been attacked.

And for what reason? Because Israel, a sovereign nation, sought to defend itself from the constant barrage of Hamas missiles threatening its cities.

Today, the sense of urgency has never been greater. We are fortunate to have a commitment from some leaders, those who gathered in London and others who have taken the time to understand the nature of the threat. From this I hope will come government action to put a damper on anti-Semitism.

[Abraham H. Foxman is a national director of the Anti-Defamation League and author of “The Deadliest Lies: The Israel Lobby and the Myth of Jewish Control”]

The latest Catholic-Jewish crisis: Turning a minus into a plus

Rabbi David Rosen | American Jewish Committee | February 2009

The Papal Audience: The papal audience on Thursday, February 12, with the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations was the first ever for that organization. Under normal circumstances, it would have been just another photo opportunity for a Jewish group with the pope. However, the events of the previous two weeks concerning the Society of Saint Pius X (founded by Archbishop Marcel Lefebvre, who broke with the Catholic Church in opposition to the teachings of the Second Vatican Council) and, in particular, one of its four bishops, Richard Williamson a public Holocaust denier gave this meeting special significance and attracted media attention. Accordingly, I traveled to Rome to represent AJC at this event.

The pope’s address to us was a powerful repudiation of anti-Semitism and Holocaust denial as sins that will not be tolerated by the Church; and emphasized the importance of nurturing the memory of the *Shoah* as a message and warning for future generations. In addition, Benedict reaffirmed his deep commitment to Catholic-Jewish relations and also announced his forthcoming visit to Israel.

It was clear that he was extremely eager to have the opportunity to reiterate these points publicly before a Jewish audience and to repair the damage and misrepresentation caused by this latest crisis in Catholic-Jewish relations. This audience was, in fact, an important symbolic confirmation of the remarkable clarification that the Vatican had issued a week beforehand.

The Vatican had explained that, contrary to popular misrepresentation, it had **not** embraced and welcomed back into the Church the members of the Society of Saint Pius X (SSPX) including Williamson. All it had done was to lift the excommunication ban that Pope John Paul II had

imposed when the society started performing its own ordination of bishops without papal authorisation. Lifting this excommunication ban opened the way for the society and its leadership to return to the Church. However, they would have to first commit themselves to abiding by the teachings of the Second Vatican Council, against which they had originally rebelled. These include an affirmation of the eternal Divine Covenant with the Jewish people and the condemnation of anti-Semitism. Accordingly, the statement not only condemned Williamson's odious opinions, calling upon him to recant and categorically distance himself publicly from them, but also indicated that if he did not do so, there was no way he could be welcomed back into the Catholic Church. Yet arguably the most surprising sentence in the statement was the admission that Pope Benedict XVI had not known of Williamson's views when the excommunication ban was lifted (suggesting that had he known, he might not have proceeded as he did.)

No less astounding was the admission by the man responsible for these contacts on behalf of the Vatican, Cardinal Dario Castrillon Hoyos, who later in the day acknowledged that he also did not know about Williamson. A few days earlier the man in the Vatican responsible for relations with the Jewish people, Cardinal Walter Kasper, had complained that he had been taken completely by surprise by the Vatican's action regarding the SSPX, and he did not disguise his displeasure over this occurrence and its consequences. Such open criticism of the Vatican from within and, by implication, of its leadership is, if not unparalleled, very rare.

What has been revealed most dramatically by this episode is something that Vatican observers have been noting consistently during this papacy in contrast to the previous one namely, an amazing lack of preparation (if not disregard) for public perceptions and a profound lack of collegial consultation. The result is that time and again the Vatican has had to spend its energies on damage control and polishing up a tarnished image, when it could have prevented the distress to others and harm to itself in the first place.

Interpreting the Clarification: While the Vatican's clarification has sought to put the record straight, there are still those who fear that this episode reflects some kind of backtracking by the Catholic Church when it comes to good relations with the Jewish people. Nothing could be further from the truth.

Of course, there are many Jews who do not believe that the Catholic "leopard" ever changed its spots at all as far as its attitude toward the Jewish people is concerned. Such Jews are those who have not been able to lift themselves out of the traumas of our past and/or those who are ignorant (sometimes wilfully) of the changes of the present. However, the majority of Jews are aware of the remarkable historic changes that took place within the Catholic Church since Pope John XXIII and the Second Vatican Council; and most of those who were not, were significantly educated by the positive gestures and impact of Pope John Paul II's visit to Israel in the year 2000.

But those who are informed are fully aware that then Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, now Pope Benedict XVI, was the most trusted theological right hand of John Paul II. Accordingly, there was no chance that he would want to turn the tide back on the stunning advances in Catholic-Jewish reconciliation and understanding that took place during John Paul II's papacy. Indeed, at an unprecedented Jerusalem conference of Christian and Jewish leadership from around the world at the beginning of 1994, which took place on the heels of the historic accord between Israel and the Holy See establishing full relations between the two, Ratzinger, a keynote speaker, publicly expressed his great joy over the new full relationship between Israel and the Vatican. Moreover, since becoming pope, he has reiterated time and again his commitment to continuing the path of his predecessor concerning Catholic-Jewish relations and actually received the leadership of the Jewish representative body to the Vatican (the International Jewish Committee for Interreligious Consultations) even before receiving non-Catholic Christian representatives.

Accordingly, those aware of all this could not accept the interpretation of the lifting of the excommunication of the SSPX and Williamson as being an intentional snub toward the Jewish people that Benedict was willing to pay for the sake of Christian unity.

However, it is undoubtedly true that the matter of repairing the schism and uniting the Church is one of great preoccupation for the pope. In light (or rather in the shadow) of the above-mentioned lack of transparency in this pontificate, we have seen how damage can be done due to lack of advance consultation and consideration of the consequences of certain steps and statements. This

was the case with the papal permission given for the wider use of the Latin liturgy (which actually had already been permitted in limited cases by John Paul II), which includes an Easter prayer for the conversion of the Jews. When Benedict realized that this permission for the wider use of the Latin liturgy had a negative bearing on Catholic-Jewish relations, he sought to repair the damage by improving the offensive text. However the improvement was still a disappointment for the Jewish community and for many Catholics. This pattern of taking decisions too quickly without the necessary prior investigation, consultation, and preparation could have led the Vatican to move ahead with the rehabilitation of the SSPX without realizing all the implications and consequences. Richard Williamson's crude publicity-seeking Holocaust denial and anti-Semitic rhetoric actually performed a great service in slowing down the SSPX's move back into the Catholic fold and may, in fact, have stopped it altogether.

As mentioned, Williamson now has to publicly recant and the SSPX has to categorically accept the teachings of Vatican II before any reinstatement can proceed.

Moreover, this episode elicited remarkably widespread expressions of concern and alarm, not only from Jewish quarters, but from major national Catholic bishops' conferences as well as from individual Catholic religious leaders and political figures (including some fifty Catholic U.S. congressmen and German Chancellor Angela Merkel) who called on the Vatican to clarify matters. All these developments leading to the Vatican's eventual response and culminating in Pope Benedict's eloquent words at the February 12 papal audience have heightened the importance of Catholic-Jewish relations on the Church's contemporary agenda. In fact, we may say that this has been a classic example of turning a minus into a plus.

Undoubtedly, there are significant struggles taking place within the Catholic Church today, which are reflected in different interpretations of the teachings of the Second Vatican Council. However, what is so sweetly ironic from an historical Jewish perspective is that one of the few issues on which conservatives and liberals in the Church are in agreement is the importance of good relations with the Jewish people and an unequivocal rejection of anti-Semitism.

[Rabbi David Rosen is AJC's director of the Department of Interreligious Affairs and the Robert and Harriett Heilbrunn Institute for International Interreligious Understanding and also chairman of the International Jewish Committee for Interreligious Consultations]

Israeli animal charity sends aid to Gaza zoo

Israel@21C | 19 February

Truckloads of food and medicine for lions, horses, donkeys, and other ill and hungry animals were among the relief supplies flowing into the Gaza Strip from Israel following the recent three-week war.

It was no easy feat getting help to the inhabitants of the Gaza Zoo and to other wild and domesticated creatures in an area hostile to the Jewish state. But Eti Altman, co-founder and spokeswoman of Israel's largest animal-welfare organization, Let the Animals Live (LAL), is tenacious in her mission to alleviate suffering.

Since its beginnings in 1986, LAL has sheltered and found homes for 35,000 dogs and cats, neutered 50,000 strays, and provided veterinary care to thousands of abused horses, donkeys, crocodiles, dolphins, camels, and members of other species.

LAL's lobbying efforts have resulted in Israeli legislation banning practices such as exportation of dogs and cats to the Philippines for food; "entertaining" dog fights and matches between men and crocodiles; baboon breeding for experiments; university laboratory experiments on monkeys; and the exploitation of wild animals by circus owners. It is also working to stop the importation of live animals for slaughter.

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Altman's assistant general manager, Ilan Lusky, explains that the organisation first learned that lions in the Gaza Zoo were in distress at the end of 2007. Their food supply was limited because of blockades in the wake of attacks on Israeli border towns. Altman made phone call after phone call to Hamas government officials, determined to take the lions to a foster home in Israel. The offer was consistently refused.

Animals living in terrible conditions: But as the dawning of 2009 brought with it retaliatory Israeli raids on Gaza, Altman renewed her efforts to assist the zoo. "We found out that the situation there was terrible," says Lusky. "Many animals died in the bombings, and the remaining animals were living in poor conditions. We said, 'Let's put politics aside and take care of the animals.' We were not giving up."

Altman worked around refusals of direct aid by establishing contacts with government officials and Palestinian and international animal-relief groups such as Veterinary World Service. The Israeli Ministry of Defense granted permission for the entry of 30 truckloads of oats, hay, and veterinary supplies into Gaza. LAL volunteers brought in the goods over a period of weeks and transferred them to local Arabs for delivery. The last two trucks were dispatched on Tuesday.

An official "thank you" was neither forthcoming nor anticipated. "We're not waiting for medals or prizes," says Lusky. "Officially, they don't want our help. But we did get thanked by our international partner groups, and we know from our Palestinian contacts that the donations went to the right places."

LAL also launched a campaign to bring relief to pets affected on both sides of the conflict. Many pets were abandoned when their owners fled, or went hungry because they were unable to earn a living while under siege.

Pets deserted in bombed cities: During the war, Altman went to hard-hit southern Israeli cities with veterinarians and other volunteers to help local animal-welfare groups rescue homeless animals and distribute donated food. This initiative has extended beyond the ceasefire.

"There is an unbelievable situation with deserted pets in bombed cities such as Sderot and Ashkelon," says Lusky. "These cities are trying to take care of their people, and there is no money for the animals. Because of budgetary constraints, animals are at the bottom of the list."

LAL's shelter in Ramla houses 200 dogs and 70 cats, some of them war refugees. Lusky coordinates volunteers at the shelter, and welcomes help from tourists.

If LAL can raise enough money, it will set up free veterinary clinics in war-ravaged areas. In cooperation with Israeli pet supermarket Pet Point, it is offering emergency care packages for purchase through letlive.org.il. And if donors are found to foot the bill of \$170-\$350 per truckload, LAL hopes to continue sending aid to the Gaza Zoo and to domestic animals in Gaza.

In fact, although offers to find new homes for Gazan animals in Israel still are being rebuffed, Altman dares to hope that a continuing relationship can ease hostilities. "In light of this humanitarian effort, I have no doubt we can save many of the animals in the place," says Altman. "I am hoping that through the animals we will be able to draw the two sides closer together."