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Address to Plenary Session of the World Conference against Racism

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Seul le texte prononcé fait foi
Es gilt das gesprochene Wort*

World Conference against Racism

Durban, 2 September 2001

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am extremely pleased to be able to address the Conference today.

I wish to emphasise the commitment of the European Union to the success of this conference and to the pursuit of concrete measures to combat racism, xenophobia and intolerance both within Europe and beyond.

This Conference is an important opportunity for the world to send a strong signal condemning all forms of racism and xenophobia. I very much hope that we will seize that opportunity and that the programme of action we adopt will lead to real change on the ground. I recognise that we have some difficult issues to resolve in the next few days if we are to get that far.

The European Union is founded on certain fundamental objectives. Attaining a high level of employment and social protection. Raising the standard of living and quality of life. Promoting economic and social cohesion and solidarity. And creating an area of freedom, security and justice.

Racism undermines these all these objectives.

World Conference against Racism

The European Commission is pleased to have been involved in the preparations for the World Conference. Providing financial support for civil society to take part in the preparatory conferences and in the NGO forum here in Durban.

Because Governments cannot fight racism on their own. Racism is a problem of society and all of society must play its part.

No corner of the world is entirely free from racist violence, ethnic hatred or discrimination. Europe has certainly had and still has its share. Many countries have developed measures and strategies to combat the phenomena, which can be a model for all of us.

Racism and the activities of racists – especially in the days of the Internet – are no longer limited to the borders of a single country. Transnational groupings such as the European Union can add value to the efforts of individual states to combat racism.

The fight against racism is now firmly rooted in European law. Specific reference to the fight against racism is contained in the Treaty establishing the European Community.

The Proclamation of the Charter of Fundamental Rights in December 2000 is the most recent reinforcement of fundamental rights and non-discrimination in the EU. Article 21 of the Charter prohibits discrimination based on any ground including race, colour, ethnic or social origin.

Article 13

The European Union rejects theories which attempt to determine the existence of separate human races.

Last year, the Council of Ministers of the European Union adopted two pieces of binding legislation to prohibit discrimination on grounds of racial and ethnic origin, religion and belief, disability, age and sexual orientation.

These laws give the victims of discrimination the right to seek redress before the courts, with effective and dissuasive sanctions for those found to be in breach of the principle of equality.

The law on racial discrimination also requires governments to designate national bodies to promote equal treatment and to provide independent legal assistance to the victims of discrimination.

The Member States of the EU are now working with their civil society partners to put these laws into place in their own countries. They have until 2003 to complete the work.

Criminal law measures

Adequate criminal law measures are an important tool to combat racism and xenophobia. Apart from their punitive aspect, they have a significant dissuasive force.

At EU level, a 1996 Joint Action ensures effective legal co-operation between Member States to prevent racists from taking advantage of different legal frameworks in different countries.

The Commission now intends to make a new proposal to create a framework for the Member States' laws on racist and xenophobic offences. The proposal will also deal with racist and xenophobic material on the Internet, with the underlying principle that what is illegal off-line should be illegal on-line.

To be effective, laws have to be systematically and rigorously enforced. An important dimension of the fight against racism and xenophobia is to support the capacity of law enforcement agencies and the judiciary. The Commission funds training and exchange programmes to help law enforcement authorities achieve these objectives.

Immigration and asylum

Migrants are not the only victims of racism and xenophobia. But they are among the most vulnerable groups. And racism directed at them needs to be dealt with through common immigration and asylum policies as well as through social policy.

A European summit in 1999 set down the principle that Europe's immigration and asylum policies must be developed hand in hand with a vigorous integration policy for legally resident migrants. The European Council declared that the objective of this policy should be to grant migrants rights and obligations comparable to those of EU citizens. This is crucial to promote social cohesion and to combat the rise of racism and xenophobia.

These common policies on immigration and asylum must be clear to our own citizens and must offer guarantees to people who seek protection in or access to the European Union. We want an open and secure European Union, fully committed to the obligations of the Geneva Refugee Convention and other relevant human rights instruments, and able to respond to humanitarian needs on the basis of solidarity. The European Commission is tabling a series of proposals in order to implement these commitments.

Practical action underway

We know though, that there are many areas of discrimination that cannot be tackled by law.

Practical action is needed to reach out to people and to help change the underlying prejudices that fuel racist attitudes and behaviour.

Education is called to play a fundamental role in this endeavour. Experience with the European Community in the field of education and training shows how important it is to put intercultural education into practice and to nurture an intercultural dimension in everyday pedagogical practices. This is instrumental in preventing racist and xenophobic attitudes and behaviours, while giving each individual the necessary tools to understand diversity and cope with the differences, whatever they might be.

Wide-reaching action is needed, not just in schools and colleges, but in the workplace. In social welfare systems. In housing. And in providing access to goods and services.

The European Community has decided to provide financial support to a range of initiatives bringing together local and regional authorities, civil society, trade unions, employers, the media and academics to develop our knowledge of how to combat racism.

This combination of legislation and practical action is an important contribution to the fight against racism in Europe.

Fight against racism in third countries

The fight against racism is also an essential dimension of the European Union's human rights policies. Tackling racism and promoting the needs of indigenous peoples are fully integrated into our political dialogue and initiatives with partner countries, including in the framework of human rights projects and development co-operation programmes with NGOs and international organisations.

The Community also wishes to pay particular attention to the fight against racism in the context of its own enlargement to take in new states over the next few years.

European Union Monitoring Centre

Finally, we have also established the European Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia. The Centre reports on levels of racism across the EU, and highlights good practices to combat it.

Because good information and research are essential if we are to tackle racism head on.

Multiple discrimination/gender

Racial discrimination can have particularly devastating effects when it is combined with discrimination on other grounds such as gender, age, religion, disability, or sexual orientation.

In the case of gender equality, the Community's Framework Strategy takes a comprehensive approach to this issue.

One of the five areas covered is gender equality in civil life, which includes human rights and fundamental freedoms for women and men.

The Community supports awareness-raising measures to empower women facing multiple discrimination and fights for greater gender equality in economic life, in political life, in relation to social rights and access to services. Gender equality, like ethnic equality, must be pursued through all policies that have a bearing on it.

Conclusion

We have set out information about the European Union's contribution to combating racism in a booklet, which we have made available here at the Conference.

You will see that I have described today just some of the wide range of actions we have been able to take together as 15 Member States.

And yet hardly a day goes by in the European Union without reports of racist attacks. Not to mention the daily experience of discrimination of people from ethnic minority and migrant communities. The same is true of other parts of the world.

We will all benefit from a positive and concrete Programme of Action to guide us towards our common goal of banishing racism and xenophobia from our world. Some difficult issues still remain to be resolved. If we are to leave Durban with something which today's victims of racism will thank us for, we must all show good will, imagination and ingenuity in solving those problems.

Thank you.