

Envoys back UN vow to combat racism, African-American groups blast Obama for US absence

FRANK JORDANS

Associated Press Writer

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GENEVA (AP) — Over 100 countries agreed Tuesday on a declaration to combat racism and related forms of intolerance worldwide. The United States was not among them, prompting sharp criticism from African-American groups participating in the U.N.'s second global conference on racism.

The 143-point declaration was a broad call to fight racism and discrimination against minorities.

It also warns against stereotyping people because of their religion, a key demand of Islamic states who say Muslims have been unfairly targeted for their beliefs since the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks in the United States.

The declaration reaffirms principles agreed at the U.N.'s first global racism meeting eight years ago in Durban, South Africa, when the United States and Israel walked out because many participants had taken the Jewish state to task over its treatment of Palestinians.

The United States and Israel also boycotted the second meeting in Geneva this week over fears it would repeat anti-Israel outbursts — as happened Monday when Iran's president called the Jewish state the "most cruel and repressive racist regime."

Germany, Italy, Poland, Australia, Canada, New Zealand and the Netherlands also stayed away from the conference.

The U.S. boycott did not sit well with the executive director of the Atlanta-based U.S. Human Rights Network.

"We believe that the issue of Israel was always a pretext," said Ajamu Baraka, whose group has in the past said the U.S. is ignoring persistent racial disparities at home. He said issues such as possible reparations for the effects of the trans-Atlantic slave trade appear to have contributed to the U.S. decision to stay away.

Officials at the U.S. mission in Geneva declined to comment.

"The boycott of the Obama administration both saddens us and angers us," said Jaribu Hill, executive director of the Mississippi Workers' Center for Human Rights.

"We will not let Mr. Obama off the hook simply because he stands inside black skin, or because his campaign served to energize and inspire thousands of young people and people of color, and those who have historically been locked out," she said.

Ejim Dike of the New York-based Urban Justice Center said by staying away, Obama had missed an opportunity to challenge Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad over his views on Israel.

Ahmadinejad's speech Monday, in which he also accused the West of using the Holocaust as a "pretext" for aggression against Palestinians, caused all 23 European Union countries present to walk out of the conference hall in protest.

All but one — the Czech Republic — later rejoined the conference and approved the declaration.