

THE DURBAN DIARIES



What really happened at the UN Conference Against Racism in Durban (2001)

by Joelle Fiss



Joelle Fiss was the chairwoman of the European Union of Jewish Students from 1999-2001. During her mandate she led a delegation of European Students to the Conference against Racism in Durban. After completing her mandate at EUJS, Joëlle started her career in the European Union as press officer of the European Parliament's Foreign Affairs committee. Today, Joëlle is a policy advisor for the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe, a centre-right political party and the third-largest political force in the European Parliament.

The European Union of Jewish Students (EUJS) is the umbrella organization for thirty-four national Jewish student unions in Europe and the Former Soviet Union, representing over 200,000 Jewish students. Cognizant of the religious, linguistic and cultural diversity that make up the European Jewish community, EUJS is a constituent member of the European Youth Forum, the leading platform for more than 90 national youth councils and international NGOs, and is the only Jewish organization represented at that level. It is supported by the Council of Europe, the European Commission, all recognized Jewish organizations, and is a member of the World Union of Jewish Students (WUJS). EUJS is one of the largest international student organizations worldwide and the first Jewish Youth NGO to obtain Consultative Status to the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations. Its annual programming includes the renowned Summer University, international, inter-religious, inter-generational seminars, study sessions at the European Youth Centre, and cutting edge work that puts it at the forefront of the European context.

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Against Racism in Durban (2001)**

By Joelle Fiss

Distributed by the European Union of Jewish Students
Sponsored by

ISSN ISSN Foundation,
Institute for Security Analysis and Strategic Networking

This is the story of a group of young Jews who attend the World Conference Against Racism in Durban, on the southern tip of Africa. Stretching their feet in the plane on their way to Durban, they chuckle, order drinks, casually read the conference program one last time. They feel important to attend such an event, organised by the United Nations. This fancy trip is a reward after the sweaty, less glamorous hours of campaigning in small offices. They wonder excitedly if they will be able to say a few words in public during the meetings. Will new encounters give birth to new projects? What will the atmosphere be like among the crowds of young people? You just don't fly off to South Africa every day. Taking part in a global conference gives deeper meaning to individual commitment. It somehow proves that the daily nitty-gritty work is finally paying off with some importance. Our NGO belongs to this tremendous community without borders that relentlessly fights to eradicate racial prejudice. Each participant will come with his or her own message, experience and story. It's time to open up to the others, to be inspired and to share. Let's have another drink!

This is the story of a group of puzzled young Jews who return from Durban confused and disorientated. For the first time in their lives, they had been subjected to racism; by people who held antiracist speeches, who chanted peace and love songs. Thousands of individuals united, all in the name of antiracism, to isolate them, offend them, and intimidate them. Their perceptions shift. Nothing appears to be the same as before. A new phenomenon, judeophobia, which remained in their minds as an abstract notion until then, brutally imposed itself as a new political order. Anxiously, they wonder what will await them back home. They feel misunderstood. Their vision of politics, of human rights and of civil society blurs up in their minds. The prism with which they used to analyse their world with, twists to the point of distortion. They stare cynically at their naive ideals of yesterday and gape at how human relations in society can trigger unthinkable psychological dynamics.

Once returned from Durban, these once-boisterous campaigners withdraw themselves from many a political discussion, first and foremost on matters relating to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Miles away from the battle fields of the Middle East, they no longer have the drive to convince, even in Europe where one has the luxury to stand up and defend ones ideas by words- not violence. They shy away from public conferences and cringe when they are asked to speak their mind. Why all this excessive embarrassment? It's as if they are haunted by the experience of Durban and they can no longer distinguish a healthy, energetic debate from the dogmatic, radicalised beings that

surrounded them during the conference.

This text aims to create a psychological detour around a political event that lasted a few days. The Durban Diaries try to illustrate how in a brief fraction of time, profound effects can weaken the morale of a group. How can a group regain confidence in the community of the NGO's, after having physically felt the hatred of racism committed in those surroundings? How can we make sure that a similar experience will not occur again?

The world Conference against Racism triggered violence against Jews, just a few hours before the attacks on the United States, on September 11th. The brutality of the hatred unleashed in Durban, the collective anger that was railed against Israel, the United States and the West in general, resonated as a warning of coming times.

IN DURBAN, THERE WERE VARYING DEGREES OF HATRED

The conference kicked off with sharp criticisms of Israel.

The second day, the level of morality of each State within the international community was structured into a hierarchy. Israel was criminalised and completely relegated to the bottom rung of the ladder. Many NGO delegates from all parts of the world started commenting: «*In Jerusalem, the Israeli leaders have really built the foundations of a racist regime. We should do something about this*».

On the third day, Jews of the entire world had become accomplices of this evil regime. To speak out against Zionism is to defend human rights and to nobly resist evil. That is how you define someone «just», or in other words, someone on the «right side» of history.

At the end of the conference, the Jewish delegates have names, faces and personalities. Human rights activists can no longer respect them, because they threaten the antiracist cause.

In parallel to the (de)gradation of this political debate, violence arose through personal confrontations. On the first day, we were offended by angry rhetoric at the Youth summit. The second day, we were accused of being murderers, «sucking the blood» of the Palestinians. The third day, people fixed our eyes

and said: «*We know who you are*». The tone became increasingly personal. When walking, we began turning our heads to make sure nobody was following us. The fourth day, we were no longer walking alone in the stadium.

In Durban, the international community of NGOs was compliant to the attempt of criminalising the Jews. At lightning pace, a minority of delegates managed to manipulate thousands of participants and impose the influence of its resentful ideology. In only a few days, a collective moral code was built; it called upon the civil society to sort out the «good» from the «evil».

Durban was not a matter of a few individuals led astray. This was a carnival of hatred, orchestrated by the NGOs, «civil society » and certain non democratic governments. Although the public opinion believed that the delegates were aiming to champion the cause of eradicating racism, this was not the case. In the consciousness of the human rights activists present, many evils result from Jewish deeds: a political conflict between Israelis and Palestinians, was twisted into one about race. Since Durban, anti-Semitism is indeed alive and kicking. So much so that anti-Jewish virulence has been exacerbated since then, through hate-speech and aggressions against individuals. These acts are steadfastly juxtaposed onto the context of violence in Israel and the occupied territories.

Today, the virus of Durban has contaminated Europe. In 2003, a report by the European Observatory on racism and xenophobia, (which, oddly enough had not been made public by the European Union for four months, despite public requests), analyses this phenomenon where new players, new means, and new stakes have become entangled. «A part of the left and the Arab-Muslim groups have combined their efforts to organize pro-Palestinian demonstrations (...) While these demonstrations were not intrinsically anti-Semitic, slogans and banners were uttered and brandished on some of them; some of these demonstrations ended by attacks against Jews or Jewish institutions».

Such was the scenario which was played out in Durban for the first time.

MONDAY, AUGUST 27th, MIDNIGHT, HOTEL ELANGENI, WORLD YOUTH SUMMIT

The echoes of «*Free, free Palestine!* » are the chants that greeted us as we slip into the hotel, where the World Youth Summit is in full swing. The words

keep buzzing in our ears until our departure, resonating each evening in our heads before falling asleep. The slogans will be the first chants we hear people yelling when arriving at the stadium, each morning.

As soon as we land in Durban, we are driven to a seaside hotel. Since yesterday, seven hundred youth activists are gathered there. Tomorrow, they will go to the Kingsmead Cricket Stadium, where the youth organisations and the NGOs will simultaneously hold working sessions in order to draft two documents they will pass on to the United Nations at the beginning of the intergovernmental conference.

Still jet-lagged, we wind ourselves through the crowds and hullabaloo at the reception, in order to find our friends from the European Union of Jewish Students, who arrived the day before. Hundreds of young people are cluttered in the hotel. Many wear the same T-shirt. At first sight, it looks like the one that was given out to the participants at the Conference. Yet, under the logo of the UN, is written: Racism can, will and must be defeated. Apartheid is real. A reproduction of the Palestinian child Mohammed Al Durra shows him clutched behind his father before his tragic death during a shooting at the start of the intifada. The photo is provided with the caption: «Killed on September 30, 2000 for being Palestinian. Since then, over 532 persons killed, a third are children. On the back of the T-shirt: «Occupation = Colonialism = Racism. End Israeli apartheid.»

A sheet is being distributed to all those present. It is the UN resolution, adopted by the General Assembly in 1975, equating Zionism to racism. There is no mention that this resolution was annulled in a vote of 111 to 25, by the same Assembly, in 1991. On walls, a poster shows Nelson Mandela quoted as «Fighting for the rights of the Palestinians». There's a guy not far who is scotch-taping swastikas on the wall near a stand.

What on earth is going on? Why these gestures, these slogans? And where are our friends, representing the European Union of Jewish Students with us? They are supposed to welcome us and evaluate this first day that we missed. Ah, there they are! There is Diane ... I walk around a group of young people who cross the reception area in single line shouting: «Free, free Palestine!», waving a Palestinian flag. Diane is speaking to the Human Rights Commissioner: «Yes, I received your fax», Mary Robinson confirms. The fax in question concerns T-shirts that say, «End Israeli Apartheid». They were fraudulently printed with the official logo of the UN conference. Diane's fax to Mary

Robinson states: «*Could you refer to this issue in your speech this evening? We believe it is necessary to avoid future misunderstandings between the participants in order to show that the UN rejects any manipulation of this conference.*» The Human Rights Commissioner has just forbidden this T-shirt to be displayed. Even so, dozens of participants continue to wear them, right in front of her eyes.

We note that accusing Israel already appears to be the main obsession of the youth participants. Rulings are violated right in front of the Human Rights Commissioner of the Conference, who no longer controls the events. From the start to its end, Durban leaves a strong impression of chaos.

TUESDAY, AUGUST 28th, KINGSMEAD CRICKET STADIUM START OF THE NGO FORUM

09.00: The Kingsmead Cricket Stadium is situated near the Convention Centre where the intergovernmental conference will be held. The place looks like a huge football stadium, scattered with white tents everywhere. Inside each one, a podium and seats are set up to hold working sessions. Journalists with microphones are hungrily seeking sound bites and chatting to the participants. We all try to become familiar with this curious and exotic landscape. I take a stroll, visit some stands and soak up the atmosphere. My eyes are still heavy from the fatigue of the trip; I wonder what I'll be able to bring to this large festival of songs, colours and ideas. I feel slightly overwhelmed, as one sometimes does, when an event is in full swing and you're trying to fit in the crowd.

Three hundred Indian Dalits march before our eyes. They denounce the condition of the two hundred and sixty million «Untouchables», victims of the caste system. Africans with colourful robes pass by and then a Mexican in traditional dress. Numerous African and Asian NGO's are fighting for the recognition of slavery as a crime against humanity. They call upon Europe and the United States to face up to their past. They intend to proclaim loud and clear that colonialism leads to racism. Calling for concrete measures to rectify past tragedies, they call to honour the memory of African victims. They urge all nations who bear historic responsibility to make formal apologies during the conference. The stadium is brimmed with stands draped with posters. Tables overflow with information flyers, posters are pasted on walls, slogans are hung up in the air; wherever you turn you see logos, flags and photogra-

phs. With your eyes continually solicited, it's easy to absorb the infinite variety of the ethnic groups and their demands, in a simply stroll.

Then, the stadium fills up with newcomers. Many participants are wearing the T-shirt from the day before forbidden by Mary Robinson. Palestinian flags are hung in all corners and angles. The stadium is being painted with keffiehs. Wherever you turn, Israel is compared to nazi Germany. Posters compare Israel to the former South African regime and its apartheid policies. Everywhere, there are images of suffering Palestinian children. Arab women display photos of their «martyred» husbands, killed during second intifada. The stand of the Lawyers of the Arab League is selling The Protocols of the Elders of Zion. Caricatures are hung up. One of them depicts a rabbi, The Protocols of the Elders of Zion under his arm, and an Israeli army cap on his head. Another poster describes how the Jews make their bread: with the blood of Muslims.

OPENING CEREMONY OF THE NGO FORUM

Eight thousand participants in the NGO Forum take their seats to listen to the welcome speeches of the NGO Forum's opening ceremony. They represent three thousand NGOs who came from the four corners of the globe. The seats are filled to the brim. At first glance when you enter the open-air seating theatre, a large banner of several metres is being waved by four individuals: «Racism: Right of return to Jews, No right of return to Palestinians».

Mercia Andrews, president of SANGOCO, the organisation responsible for the smooth running of the conference, addresses the crowd and clarifies that the conference will deal with two major subjects: the Israeli occupation of Palestine and the condition of Dalits in India. The crowd applauds frenetically, dozens participants stand up and burst into a chant of: «*Free, Free Palestine!*».

Spotlights are suddenly switched on and colour the stage. A group of African dancers' dash out from backstage and perform traditional Zulu dances. The participants start swaying to the warm and upbeat rhythms of the party. The concert is in full swing.

Our group can't share the bubbly spirit of brotherhood of the crowd. It is impossible for us to ignore this banner, this speech and this collective reaction. We already feel different. We leave the party, with a lump in our throats.

At the accreditation bureau, each delegate must fill out a form to receive his badge to enter the conference zone. People need to wait in line for hours. The air is humid. Sweat is trickling from the foreheads of the participants who try to fight off the heat. Bored, we all think we are missing loads of interesting meetings. Fill out the form, sign, and wait. Julian sees a rabbi, all in black, bearded, and with a kippah on his head. "Ah, this Conference cannot be so bad if an orthodox rabbi is participating in it", he muses ironically, determined to play down the bizarre happenings of the day. His glance falls on the rabbi's badge: «Islamic Republic of Iran.» Incredible! This is the first time he will meet a member of this Jewish community of Iran, isolated today, so rich in history and in traditions. How strange! The rabbi's badge gives him access to the governmental conference... It must be an alphabetical error, says Julian to himself. Israel follows Iran alphabetically, does it not? He must represent an Israeli religious party. But why is he accepting this administrative error? Julian decides not to start a conversation. Rather observe, suspend his questioning and bump into him later to chat.

Andrew, too, waits in the endless line. A member of the Union of the Arab Lawyers offers a brochure to those who are bored queuing. The cover juxtaposes a swastika on the star of David. The notebook abounds in anti-Semitic caricatures. Jews with long hooked noses smile cruelly. Their serpent fangs are soaked in blood. They are depicted as sadists, obsessed by money. Their military uniforms are decorated with swastikas. And to perfect the picture, these judeo-nazis are pointing their rifles at terrified Palestinians.

Andrew cannot get over it. Those who are waiting in line casually flick through the pages, rather indifferently. Why is he the only one to react? On behalf of the organisation he runs in Geneva, UN Watch, he calls to cancel the accreditation of the Union of Arab Lawyers to the gathering, due to racist defamation. He sends his request at once to the steering group. A few hours later, an answer is given to him: «*Sorry, we cannot do anything. This brochure is a political expression.*»

15.35: At the thematic committee «Colonialism and Foreign Occupation», a speaker declares: «The Jewish NGOs intend to divide the world antiracist movement.» Crowds break into applause.

16.00: «Zionism = Racism. 1975 resolution, Yes! 1991 resolution, No», displays a banner that a veiled woman is holding up. It is signed «Iranian NGO.»

17.00: At the thematic committee devoted to “Ethnic cleansing, Conflict and Genocide», a speaker declares that the existence of Israel is a hate crime. Somebody asks a question about procedure, he is booed, to shouts of: «*Jew, Jew, Jew*» A South African Jew is called an «Israeli dog».

18.00: Young people carrying “Apartheid IsReal” posters, also hand out a book entitled, «Israel, An Apartheid State». A man offers a pamphlet with Adolf Hitler’s photo to the crowd which says: «And if I had won? The good news is there would have been neither Israel nor any Palestinian bloodshed. I’ll let you guess the rest. The bad news is I would not have accepted the manufacture of the new Ladybug. I’ll let you guess the rest. » We shall discover, in the September 9th edition of the South African Sunday Times, that the author of this pamphlet is an influential member of the Muslim community of Durban, Yousuf Deedat. The Deedat family claims to be a «friend» of Osama Bin Laden. The latter is supposed to have generously contributed to the financing of their organisation, the Islamic Propagation Centre (IPC). The article emphasises that approximately three million dollars were transferred by the Bin Laden family to the bank account of this Islamic centre, over the last three years.

WEDNESDAY, AUGUST 28th

10.00: The student delegates of the Jewish caucus (we were around a dozen), decide to put up our own stand, near the press tent, at the main entrance of the NGO Forum. Let’s do what all the others are doing. It’s time to hand out our pamphlets, let’s explain our slogans.

At first, the passers by are oddly interested in our «stand», a simple two meter long wooden table, with a pile of pamphlets thrown on to it. No doubt, the Israeli flag stuck on the edge of the table, attracts them. By exhibiting it, we hope to show that it is possible to be friends of Israel while engaging in a debate of respect and antiracism. Five, ten, and then about twenty people gather around us. A Swedish human rights activist asks me how I have the nerve to be stand here and try to raise awareness of people to the ravages of anti-Semitism, while thousands of Palestinians die every day. I introduce myself as a European. I am not Israeli, but I have a close, intimate relation, with this country. The history of my people thrives on every street corner there.

I am a friend of Israel, but I do not always approve of the policies of its leaders. Yes, the Palestinians live in devastating conditions which is truly shameful for all. I explain that I am not here to discuss the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. My role here is to examine the scourge of racism and to raise awareness of one of its many variants, anti-Semitism. “Murderer”, she exclaims in front of curious onlookers who cheer her. «Haven’t you ever set foot in Gaza?», she says, closely pointing her finger at my face. My Jewish friends come to see what is going on. They start talking to the circle gathering around. In a few seconds, our stand is surrounded by people. NGO representatives abandon their own stands and rush to be part of the excitement. It’s as if nothing else but our wretched table existed in the middle of the fair. As if giving an opinion on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict was more pressing than any other cause. Everyone shouts louder to be heard. The accusations become radical. «Israel is committing a genocide!» shouts a woman. Dozens of Palestinian flags are raised and float over our table forming a rainbow of green, red, white and black pieces of cloth in the sky. Who just hung them up?

Nearly one hundred people are now surrounding us. People begin shouting: «You should not be allowed to have a stand! You, Jews, you have become racists!» Some cry. Others say nothing but stare at us with contempt. TV camera crews and radio journalists approach us from all sides. Click. A photo is taken. Can we interview you later on? Frankly, we have no clue how to react to all this. We try to hold the attention of the one person facing us to at least initiate a real exchange amid the chatter from all sides. The debate begins. Who is wrong, Sharon or Arafat? Who suffers more, Palestinians or Israelis? The questions don’t make any sense. But if these are the questions that make the crowds so furious, if we are touching the heart of what causes so much pain and humiliation, if we have pushed the button, or the «central nerve system» that ignites the frustration of the sympathisers of Palestine, then this taboo needs to be broken. We must talk about the politics of it all! Even if we hadn’t come to Durban to discuss the conflict between Palestinians and Israelis, let us do it, because that it is the only way we can start to have a real dialogue. Hopefully, once we have found a common ground, recognised the other’s suffering, and when we will have managed to get across a fragile message of peace and hope, perhaps we can then discuss racism.

Often when two people defend antagonistic views during a lively debate, a feeling of mutual respect emerges at the concluding moment. Suddenly, both fighters, exhausted from the energy spent to argument and “be right”, finish the marathon with a cordial smile, a handshake and the urge to discover who

is the person hiding behind his ideas and words. Until the last day of the conference, we were hoping for this respect and curiosity that triumphs after a genuine exchange of ideas.

Two hours later, a hundred people begin marching past us, holding an enormous Palestinian flag at arm's length. Ya il Allah! Ya il Allah! Then another hundred came out of nowhere. They gather, dotting the horizon with black, white, green and red keffiehs. In less than ten minutes, they are three hundred, then four hundred. «Stop killing our children!» they cry. Others brandish a banner: “Hector Petersong, Mohammad- Al-Dura: Twin victims of Apartheid”. While singing, some burned an Israeli flag. You'd think you were in Gaza. «Free, free Palestine!» They turn towards us. «Us», meaning a dozen young 20-somethings, encircling a two-meter wooden table! For some of the conference participants, who were obviously bored, this is the highlight of the day. Joining the crowd, they seize banners to testify against injustice and denounce the Jewish fascists. It turns into one of these scenes you see every day on television: a clamouring crowd waving burned flags, brandishing their fists in the air and protesting against security guards, who in turn place themselves in front of our table to prevent the crowd from excessive gestures. When you watch one of these «televised» scenes, comfortably seated in your cosy living-rooms in Europe, you wonder what could have brought about such a climate of revolt? Yet, this anger result from our presence. The demonstrators point their fingers at us. We are at the origin of these images. These images were broadcast that evening, on all international television channels.

We begin laughing nervously at the absurdity of the situation. Good lord, why is so much importance granted to us? The conference has barely started, is it not absurd that the first ones to appear under the spotlight are young students who have never suffered from a racist act in their life? We are privileged people, from Europe, who live and study comfortably! Don't focus on us, but rather on the forgotten ones, on all those who are living in misery, who don't have our opportunities. Other groups are jealous of the media attention we attract. But we don't want any of it! Film those who are suffering every day from discrimination. We do not deserve this collective mobilisation. We do not want any of this fame!

Peleg, who leads the World Union of Jewish Students, an activist from the Israeli left, born in Haifa, and who works shoulder to shoulder with Arabs for peace, takes a lighter out of his pocket, and lights it in his hand. «Give peace a chance, man» he says in a low voice. And just like that, we take out our

lighters and, to John Lennon's melody, we begin singing: «All we are saying is give peace a chance.» We keep repeating this sentence for a whole hour. «All we are saying is give peace a chance.» And we call on the crowd to sing with us, to knock down this image, there, right in front of the cameras, to deliver this simple message from Durban, unanimously. Let the world at least notice a common ideal to peace. The crowd retorts: «Free, free, Palestine, free Palestine!».

Why do we represent a threat in their eyes? They are hundreds, we are a dozen. In my mind, it almost symbolises the demographic reality of the Arab-Israeli conflict. It brutally reveals the isolation of Israel to us, surrounded by a sea of hostility. At once, we, European Jews, grasp the isolation in which the Israelis live on a daily basis. I wonder if the Palestinians in turn perceive us a stubborn, tight-knit group, not ready to budge from its tiny territory..

Daphné is in a state of shock. She is not singing and wanders off away from the stand. She is curled up under a tree, in search of some peace. She is one of the Jewish activists determined to separate the fight against anti-Semitism from the cause of peace in the Middle East. For her, criticizing Israel does not amount to criticising the Jews. Over the coming days in Durban, her certainties will begin to blur. She will be persistently associated to Israel's actions and will not be able to speak without being stigmatised. This external environment is fusing her personal identity with Israel's; she starts realising that - even if she doesn't want it - the fate of Israel and hers are intrinsically connected.

Marta, on the other hand, chooses to defend Israel. That certain Europeans speak out only against anti-Semitism irritates her. She is a Zionist and her fate is intertwined with that of Israel. Marta, who stands up ardently to our opponents throughout the demonstration wonders why every word she says is deemed false, deceitful to them. She who cares so much about convincing, rebels that nobody deigns to hear her point of view. Not even among those who are observing at a distance, nobody is trying to understand or, let alone, to play the intermediaries between both parties.

Julian is scared and calls the police, who take much time to reach the location. Two hours later, he climbs on a rooftop-like terrace where he can watch from above the demonstrations. He listens to the mutters of passers-by. Nobody takes any action. Some grumble in a low voice: «Oh, again the Jews and Arabs!» As if it had always been in the nature of things that «the two of

them» confront each other...

Diane hides away to shed a few tears. She is frustrated by the violent images surrounding her, added with a heavy dose of emotional fatigue. She has been in Durban for already two days. This scene is giving her flashbacks of her solitary defiance the day before, at the Youth Summit.

14.00: A man approaches Joav: «You have no right to exist and we shall get you!».

14.30: We are handing out white T-shirts to the passers-by. The front of the T-shirt bears a blue star of David with, inside, the symbol of peace and love. On the back, is written: Fight against racism, not against Jews; then the message of Martin Luther King: «When people criticize Zionism, they mean the Jews». Dozens of women and African children are wearing them. They do not seem to care about the star of David. Next to them, some rabbis are calling out to the passers-by. They flaunt banners: «Zionism is the main cause of anti-Semitism».

What a crazy image, to see Zionist Africans and anti-Semitic rabbis roaming the city!

15.00: Durban is above all a war of images and slogans. People boast about how they suffer the most. They shout the loudest to be heard. They march through the stadium so that the press takes an interest in their cause. We did not play this game at the outset. But once attacked, we are faced with a choice: either to remove our badges and return home, or to defend ourselves, with our voices and our banners, in the middle of the crowd. We too begin hanging slogans from our stand. We raised them in the morning, noon and evening: *World Conference Advocating Racism, Youth Summit, Useless Summit! Stop terror and violence, UNbalanced Conference.*

15.30: Sometimes, things would get ridiculous. We would sing «give peace a chance» and hand out flowers to scornful passers-by. Damn, enough is enough! We get fed up. Why are we doing this? This is stupid. We go fetch a cup of coffee. We loosen up and feel less tired. We return back to the stand.

16.00: Journalists stop by to interview us. The cameras begin filming, just so that images are ready if a new commotion starts again.

16.30: The «rabbis» appear again, striding from one stand to another, chatting with journalists, protesting when one of us speaks, proudly raising their *Jews against Zionism* posters in the anti-Israeli demonstrations. They belong to a sect, «Neturei Karta», whose main belief is that the existence of the state of Israel constitutes a sin. Dressed as extreme ultra-orthodox men, they nevertheless do not follow the religious practice, as they carry their banners during the daytime of the Sabbath, which is against Jewish law. They interrupt working sessions, charge towards the podiums and hold up signs stating: *Israel does not represent world Jewry, End Zionist occupation and oppression now*, and are welcomed by a burst of applause.

At first, we believe it's all a huge joke, almost like a candid camera. We can hardly decide if the situation is amusing, sad or scandalous. The German channel ZDF is attempting to interview the rabbi to have a «Jewish perspective on the Durban event ». Julian explains that in no way do they represent the Jewish delegation. Still, the journalist insists. Other newspapers fall into the trap of this kitsch media stage setting, like the Figaro of September 5th: “Around the conference centre, two men pace up and down, hand in hand, the sidewalks of Durban. An Israeli rabbi from New York and a Palestinian living in London. One belongs to Naturei Karta International (Jews united against Zionism); the other one is President of the Islamic Human Rights Commission. They explain to whoever wants to listen, that Judaism and Zionism should not be confused. They assure that, in unison, Jews and Arabs are made to get along because both peoples are of Semitic origin. These are two discreet voices in the general cacophony”.

End of the day: Daphné and Diane are walking to and fro, irritated by not accomplishing any constructive work. They are fed up with justifying themselves. Let us do something positive. They contact a representative of the NGO AFSC Roma Youth Delegation from Europe that fights for the recognition of the rights of Romani people in central Europe. They offer to co-draft a declaration. The idea is to gather the two minorities to exchange good practices to fight discrimination in Europe, to recall our common history, the genocide committed by the Nazis, the Shoah for the Jews, Porajmos for the Romani, to create networks for better coordination in our educational work, as well as to organise common awareness-raising campaigns. Jewish and Romani delegates meet repeatedly; they listen to each other, discuss and work on a joint statement. They present the final version to their respective organisations. Our students' union plans to organise a press conference to show that the work in Durban can be constructive.

The representative of the AFSC must still sign the final text. Diane and Daphné are called into a meeting. «Sorry, we cannot participate in this project any more», the Roma representative humbly says. But good Lord, why not? This is nothing more than a typical project often carried out among youth organisations. No controversy there. Just a positive message between two European minorities, coupled with basic recommendation to work together! «Sorry, we received some advice not to work with you». Both girls would find out the true reason a little while later: «We support the Palestinian cause. If we work with you, all the NGOs will shut the door in our faces. Furthermore, we need to think about our safety, here, in Durban» he explains, his glance downcast. «But when we return to Europe, we'll talk again, right?» We remained stunned.

Nobody wants to work with us, for fear of being subject to the same boycott. «Networking», before anything else. Political opportunism before ideas. All of our projects are shot down at the root. What's the use in getting involved?

17.00: At almost every debate, somebody raises the question of «Israeli racism » against the Palestinians. An apologetic Tibetan approaches a member of the European caucus: «Excuse me, the Palestinian problem is terrible, maybe the worst nowadays, but could you please help me add a sentence in the final document on the Tibetan genocide?»

18.00: Julian goes to the working session on «Colonialism, Foreign Occupation, Palestinians and new forms of Apartheid». He recognises a bunch of new friends who represent the indigenous populations of Colombia and Ecuador. They unexpectedly met, stumbling across each others paths in the airport, waiting for the plane to Durban. At the boarding gate for the flight from Charles-de-Gaulle, at three o'clock in the morning, our two groups began chatting about music, books and art. Some of them were strumming a guitar; the others were speaking about their journeys to Latin America. On the plane, we promised to discover the night-life of Durban together, go out, drink some beers and tour the local bars. Delighted to see them again, Julian greets them. The debate, in the room, is focused on Israel. Again, the Jewish state is depicted as the last fascist bastion, to be isolated from the international community. The merry band from Charles-de-Gaulle is applauding. «Too bad. I thought that they, at least didn't care Jews!» Julian laughs to himself. «Listen, my friend, Israel is attempting to promote slavery», his friends reply. Julian tries to convince them of the contrary but gives up. He feels such a

rift between them that he leaves them to their certitudes and convictions.

This seemingly futile episode with the Latinos asks a pressing question: what limits do political beliefs impose upon social relations? When you overhear discussions fraught with prejudices in your local café, how do you brush them aside and carry on chitchatting with no embarrassment? How is it possible for a young Jew to tackle the Middle East conflict since the second intifada? How can it be possible for a young Muslim to speak about Islam after the 11 September? What do we do, when we form friendships with people whose ethics, outlook and ideals oppose everything in which we believe? Is it possible to connect on a deeper level with those who disregard some of your fears? And as in the case of Julian's Latino buddies in Durban, how do you go out drinking, crack up jokes and act as if nothing were wrong, with people who think that Israel is a racist state? More and more people tell me that the Jews run the world, that Ariel Sharon was more dangerous than Saddam Hussein ever was. They confide it to me at work or in bars. So what do you do? The solution is not to withdraw into a ghetto, nor to refuse the debate. Neither is it to ignore your beliefs or to avoid fighting against this deep embarrassment.

19.00: Talia, a South African student, is pasting up some posters: "Israel is the only country in the Middle East where women have the right to vote". An Israeli Arab tears them away right in front of her eyes. Just like that, she begins crying in the middle of the discussion. There is too much emotion. She does not understand her own reaction. The members of our caucus collapse from fatigue. We are all weakened, after such little time.

21.00: The Jewish Club becomes our headquarters. This is the cosy bubble where we huddle up in a safe haven each evening. A true peace of mind floods the premises. At the club, the Jewish community of Durban, warm and generous, is a real source of comfort. We polish off a good meal there. It's our first meal of the day. At the stadium, we are so overcome by our feelings and by the incidents, that we are neither hungry, nor have time to eat. Here, as soon as we enter the club, we hear the hustle and bustle of the plates and the chorus of excited conversation. The cooks serve us portions as large as their smiles. In the cafe, the members of the community ask us to tell them about our day. These moments help us create a transition, separating the hostility of the day from our inner state of mind. It is an essential step in digesting the events of the day and to recalibrate our sense of strength and balance. The club is the only place - except for the families' homes where we are being hosted - where we can be ourselves and think aloud, questioning the others on

how they would have reacted facing such an incident. It is also the only place where we can laugh or giggle, turn the drama into mockery, have some more cake, smoke a cigarette, sip on a drink and contemplate the fraternal surroundings and smile. We are often engaged in an ongoing and lively exchange when Yehuda Kay, the main coordinator of our caucus, roars his customary: «People! Time for a debriefing session!»

THURSDAY, AUGUST 30th

09.00- 11.00: A typical morning: roaming the stands, reacting, getting worked up, speaking until we get booed, protesting by holding a solitary poster in a session in which Jews are being criticised, giving an interview to a radio station that grants us one minute thirty seconds, ignoring the insults as we enter one room and leave to another. We begin to worry about the disappearance of a Jewish colleague who's missing since the morning. Where is he? Sensing the anger of passers-by who bump into us, while noticing that many other participants are flirtatiously joking and fixing social events for the evening...

We don't even go to the bar or the bathroom alone anymore. We are now always asking a delegate to accompany us. Not because we have received instructions for our safety, but because we are really afraid of strolling alone in the enclosure of the stadium. Certain members of the group are no longer wearing their badges. Others have changed their kippah for a cap.

11.30: It's time for one of the many meetings of the European caucus. The aim is to bring together a maximum number of European participants to review common interests to collectively defend. Always on the alert, ready to jump up at the first provocation, my nerves are electric. I slip into the tent with my friends from the European Union of Jewish Students. How quiet it is here! Everybody is speaking in a low, respectful tone. Seated in a circle, each delegate takes turn to speak, one at a time. The speakers explain how the final text from Durban will be applied to their national action programs, how to urge the governments to take on more initiatives; they outline the specific weaknesses each country has in the field of discrimination and how to coordinate more work at a European level. Not a single word on the «taboo question»: the Middle East. Besides, the Europeans are proud to distance themselves from this controversy, to keep their cool and stimulate constructive exchanges between delegates, without breaking the harmony of the group. In these first days in Durban, the Europeans are conducting their affairs in a right and proper manner. Business as usual.

It could have given us a feeling of comfort. We could have said to each other «Oh, at least the Europeans are not wrought by the hysterical virus which is spreading across the masses! They are quietly discussing their projects, as if all in all they were in any European city! » But the bubble in which the Europeans snuggle up to was so far from our reality that we could not identify ourselves to their concerns. The participants were pretending that the anarchy surrounding them did not exist. They would say to themselves «Well, let's just try to devote ourselves to the positive elements of this encounter». Our feeling of isolation, our vulnerability and our increasing cynicism prevent us from doing what the others were doing; encounters, calm discussions and project proposals. No time to talk, we were in an urgent situation. It was more important to return back to the stand, to speak in a working session, to organise a meeting with the press, to defend our Jewish colleagues and to resolve the last crisis which would have erupted at that very minute.

It is regrettable that diplomacy is no longer an option when one is parachuted onto a battlefield. After about ten minutes, we left the room as discreetly as we had arrived.

12.00: The Jewish caucus decides to hold a press conference with two objectives. Firstly, to denounce the anti-Semitic literature, which was circulating across the stadium. Secondly, to expose to the media this atmosphere in which we feel constantly harassed. We invite the journalists on the theme: «You're not a Racist, right?» The situation deteriorates to the point that a session planned in the official program of the conference, on "The Revisionism of the Holocaust", which was to be held in the Jewish club, had just been cancelled for security reasons. The press takes seats inside a tent. According to those in charge of security, it was «the least likely place where we could be physically attacked»...

Even before our representatives end their introduction, a group of demonstrators, some provided with press passes, burst into the room. They approach the speakers, speaking incomprehensible gibberish in front of the cameras. For security reasons, the press conference is interrupted. Our press conference is being taken into hostage. No journalist has the opportunity to ask us a question. (How ironic that this disturbance demonstrated exactly what we were attempting to explain in words to the press). Strange is such a press conference, where you receive insults instead of questions. Here in Durban, denouncing racism means unleashing more of it. One thing is sure: when you lose your freedom to speak out, you get the strange sensation that you are losing the lucidity of your own ideas.

14.00: In a discussion devoted to “Crimes of hatred, hate groups, ethnic cleansing, conflict and genocide», a Jewish delegate from Uruguay asks for the floor. As he identifies himself, the session president, a Palestinian, interrupts him: «*This is a discussion about victims and you are not a victim, sir.*»

14.30: Our time to take the floor finally arrives: the debate dedicated to anti-Semitism. This is the opportunity to clarify things. Each minority that considers itself to be a victim of racism has the opportunity to tell his story and to share it with the others. According to the rules of the conference -one of the only ones that seems to be applied effectively in this case- the victims of a particular form of racism have the right to share their experiences without an outside group trying to modify their version of the facts. The group of experts explain the historic roots of anti-Semitism, and then detail its contemporary forms. There is more and more noise in the room. People call for silence. Then a few dozen participants abruptly enter the tent and gather around the entrance as if to block its access. The background noise forces the speakers to break off. From time to time, the Jewish participants seated stand up in protest: «*Listen to the experts! Please respect the speakers!* »

The discussion is quickly diverted from its objectives. In the room, some stand up: «*After the Shoah, how can you inflict on the others the same suffering as you have been subjected to?* » They criticise the Jews, former victims who, as soon as they were freed, in turn became executioners. Revisionists are also in the room. They come «to correct», or rewrite history. For them, the belief that six million Jews perished is pure fiction. The Jewish lobby makes these kind of stories up in order to make the whole world feel guilty. It is a conspiracy so that the world complies with its will to dominate the globe. Other speakers assert that any Israeli action against the Palestinians must be considered as an «anti-Semitic act.» They call for condemnation of «*the Israeli anti-Semitism practiced against the Palestinians*». Moreover, Arabs are also semites and thus must appear among the victims of the holocaust and be compensated, they exclaim. It implies that the Jew, not only colonised Palestine, but worse, colonised words and concepts, by appropriating itself the term «anti-Semitism». Anti-Semitism here is expressed through anti-semantics, where history is reinvented by appropriating a new terminology.

Right at this moment, dozens of persons behind the entrance mount an assault. They storm into the tent and scream: «*You are all murderers! You have Palestinian blood on your hands!*» They approach us, as we gather together. Panic pushes some to run away. «*You don't belong to the human race!*» «*Chosen people? You are cursed people!*» «*I won't speak to you, as long as you do*

not remove this thing » a man throws at David, who is wearing a kippa.

«Why haven't the Jews taken responsibility for killing Jesus? They have sucked our blood, all these years. We don't want you here. Jews don't belong in Jordan. Jews don't belong in Israel.» «I believe in a Jewish state...On Mars!» «Sharon, Golda Meir...They are all the same. We cannot convince Sharon to be a human being».

During the first confrontation, at the Jewish students stand, we were protected behind a small wooden table. The barrier, although symbolic was important from a psychological point of view: we were separated from our aggressors. Here, this place was being invaded. The anger against us could no longer be contained. We had no more refuge. The violence having become physical, all we could do was to run away. Our session was interrupted.

As panic invades the workshop, I rush out on the lawn. I'm suffocating. I need a breathing space to pull myself together... and not cry in front of everybody. Around me, I can hear echoes of speeches inside the surrounding tents of other working sessions. I position myself near one of these tents and I light a cigarette. I will grab five minutes before returning to the chaos. A young man of Arab origin stares at me and tries to attract my attention. As I get ready to leave, he flashes me a huge smile. That feels so good, a big smile. Even more, I suppose, because this person must know that I'm part of the Jewish caucus. He probably spotted me, with all those from my group. However Jewish I am, he smiled at me! He introduces himself and wants to invite me to drink some coffee. I begin joking with him in Arabic. I feel close to Arab culture; my parents were born in Egypt and in Sudan; they still express the culture they nurtured there. The language, the traditions, the notoriously funny Arabic sense of humour and of course the delicious food. The smiling man hands me a pamphlet. The pamphlet calls for the liberation of Palestine, signed... Hamas. What? Hamas is here? «You are part of Hamas?» I murmur, almost to myself. «Aiwa, yes», he answered me. These guys blow themselves up in discotheques, on the terraces of cafes and at bus stops, in Israel. They do everything to make Jewish blood flow and everything to prevent the resumption of the negotiations between moderates. And the young man in front of me adheres to this movement. «Umm... don't you have any more copies?» I ask him, my voice trembling. My hands are sweaty. I am really afraid. «No, I don't have any more. But wait! I am going to ask my friend from Hezbollah if he still has any.»

We are in a surreal situation. Here am I, all alone, at a UN conference,

under a tent sheltered by the representatives of Hamas and Hezbollah. They even think that I am a part of their group. And above all, at a conference against racism!

I look around me. How can such violent movements, covered with blood, be accredited to Durban? Do they represent the political or military branches of these organisations? What on earth are these jihadists doing here? Are they the ones who organised demonstrations where flags were being burned in front of our eyes? Are they preparing an attack? How come they feel safe enough to reveal their identities to anyone who passes by? I am physically afraid. If the guy from Hamas did not recognise me already, the others will surely alert him if I stay there too long. I run to find my colleagues. What a feeling of security to see them once again! Nothing had changed. Everybody continues to shout. In the midst of the clamour, you sometimes hear an insult. Exactly like before.

«*Joëlle, you will never guess*», somebody says to me when I arrive out of breath, into the tent. I interrupt him: «*No, let me speak! I have just met...* » «*Hey guys, this is really not the right time. Let's talk tonight. Right now we have work to do*», somebody else interrupts me. It is always like that. Each person becomes wrapped up in his own story. Each of us rushes off to share it because that the way of «pinching our own arms», of reassuring ourselves that we are still in the real world and that we are not inventing stories to ourselves.

The working session resumes. With a relative calm restored, the president decides to divide the plenary session into small groups. Inside each group, there will be people who «recognise » the contemporary existence of anti-Semitism and those who «do not recognise it. » In my group, an Iraqi girl starts to cry. She is talking nonsense, but in spite of that I find her polite- almost nice. At least she is ready to sit down and listen to me. The girl tells me I am a murderer. She is the only person, at that precise moment, ready to hear what I have to say. She talks again, this time on anti-Semitism: «*Stop thinking of that, it does not exist.*» I respond that I didn't need to provide her with a theoretical presentation of anti-Semitism. She had just attended this working session with me. The Jews had been abused; they were physically intimidated to the point that some had left the tent for fear of being assaulted. I could explain to her the historic causes and the roots of hatred towards the Jews, but its very manifestation, well she witnessed it with her own eyes, just like me. Marta tries to dissociate anti-Semitism from the israeli-palestinian conflict. She

reminds the group of centuries of European persecution. «Today, extreme right wing parties are as islamophobic as they are anti-Semitic». Marta explains that we can unite to fight against this scourge which concerns both religious communities. «I am sorry, but you have no right to raise the question of anti-Semitism, without putting in parallel the distress of the Palestinians», the Iraqi girl retorts. We tell her that we are aware that the Palestinians are suffering, that they live in unbearable conditions and that we understand their despair for the future. That is why it is absolutely necessary to support peace in the region. But how dare we imagine that both peoples will one day be able to live in peace, if even we, who do not live over there, fail to reach common ground through a meaningful NGO Declaration? We explain to her that here, we have the opportunity to demonstrate coexistence in action and respect between the Jewish and the Arab peoples. «If you recognise the Palestinian tragedy, then why don't you say anything to your Sharon government?», she asked us, genuine tears still pouring down her cheeks. I felt her pain. «We are not Israeli. Sharon is not our Prime Minister. We shall gladly speak about Palestinians during the speech which is dedicated to them. But this session is dedicated to anti-Semitism. For the time being, we have to formulate concrete recommendations for the United Nations Action Plan on the means to fight anti-Semitism.» «No, we cannot work out this text without speaking about Israel», she concludes. End of discussion.

18.30: For the first time in her life, Daphné feels physically threatened. She realises that she was not just surrounded by people carried away by their passions in the context of this conference. No, she is surrounded by extremists.

23.00: We head out to the beach. We need to unwind and let off some steam. We're told that there's a nice bar on the beach that makes great cocktails and where the music will take our minds off things. Our driver brings us there in our minibus. He parks near the sea, but once there, we have to walk some metres, and then go down onto the docks. While walking, we had become used to turning around to make sure that we weren't being followed. One of us shouts that a car is following us. We become paranoid. We start running like madmen to the bar.

A few drinks later, we leave the bar. Approaching the minibus, our laughter is cut by a: «Hey, a group is jotting down our license plate numbers!» Once in the parking lot, we hear a group running hastily into the darkness. «Who cares? We rented this minibus anyway» cries David, the South African who drove us everywhere, day and night. We all explode simultaneously into loud

laughter. That's a good sign. The tension is evaporating into the warm nights' air.

FRIDAY, AUGUST 31st

09.00: The intergovernmental conference starts today. This is an opportunity for a protest against Israel, planned to be held between noon and 4 pm. Thousands of people are expected to demonstrate throughout the city, passing through the Jewish club before arriving at the conference centre, where the negotiations between governments are set to begin.

We receive strict instructions not to approach the demonstrators. Nobody is allowed to return to the Jewish club. We must stay calm. We mustn't wear our «Fight against racism, not against the Jews» T-shirts. Everyone must remain discreet, especially in the stadium. For the first time, we sense our (Jewish) security team to be quite tense. The day before, the people in charge had held long meetings in low voices. We did not know what they were talking about. We discover that since our arrival, bodyguards have been following our every step at the stadium, to make sure that no attack threatens us.

The deserted stadium looks like an abandoned battlefield. There is almost an apocalyptic air of silence there. Three hundred tenacious Dalits continue to march past, as they would do every day.

10.00: A journalist approaches Marta and I to ask us some questions. The cameras are rolling. We begin to talk about our personal experiences in Durban. A Palestinian girl, who appears out of the blue, begins to shout: «You're lying, you're lying.» Then, turning to the journalist, she says, with pleading eyes: «Let me give you my version of the facts.» Tears are pouring down her cheeks. We began to talk with her, without realising that the camera was still on. The journalist breaks the silence: «Can we do another take, please?» «We are not on a movie set» we reply sharply. Marta suspects it was all staged. «This Palestinian girl simply wanted to cry in front of the camera. And the journalist is delighted by the show. Let's get out of here», she whispers to me in my ear. Marta's nerves are sparking; she feels exploited each time she addresses the media. «Do you think that I am getting paranoid?» she wonders out loud.

10.30: Diane is no longer wearing her badge when she roams alone in the stadium. A man approaches her, handing her a piece of paper. She reads it

while walking: «Anti-Semitism is by definition a racist concept since it bases superiority on religion and the national scene ... Why should the demands of particular nationals or followers of a religion benefit from a privileged attention from the conference? Does the whole world need to bear the burden of the Third Reich?» The pamphlet is signed Revolution Committees Movement. Diane retracts her steps and asked the man, who is wearing a Libyan badge, for whom he is working. «I know who you are.» he says to her, his look full of hatred. «I know what you're doing here and I don't want to talk with you.»

At the beginning of the NGO Forum, we were stigmatised as a group. Now, our faces are being recognised. We are being followed at times. Are some of these people in charge of watching us and others sent to protest? Our sense of feeling physically threatened did not just fall from the sky. This fear, and to a certain extent paranoia, resulted from the accumulation of many different experiences and sensations. Whether it was true or not, we felt watched everywhere by «faceless» people.

13.00: With greatest caution, we catch a cab to the Belgian embassy, where a cocktail party is organised in honour of the European diplomats present at the conference. The European Union of Jewish students are invited to meet Louis Michel, the Belgian Foreign Secretary. Despite the intergovernmental conference having just started, the international community was already anticipating the boycott of the American and Israeli delegations to be announced shortly. The main responsibility for the negotiations would thus rest on the European Union, chaired by Belgium.

Louis Michel dedicated an entire hour to us while a mass of people rushed up to speak to him. We sat down around a table near the swimming pool of the villa. We showed the Minister all the anti-Semitic pamphlets that had circulated at the Youth Summit and the NGO Forum. Some showered Hitler with praise, others portrayed the Jews with big noses spitting out blood. Then, we displayed the threatening letters sent to the Jewish community of Durban, plus some personal anecdotes. The Minister was genuinely shocked. He made copies of these documents- that he would denounce the contents during a press conference several days later. The fact that he dedicated so much time to us, showed how crucial our situation was vis à vis the whole conference.

In order to reach a final agreement on the governmental text, it would be necessary to untangle the tensions resulting from the Israeli-Palestinian conflict before tackling the question of the reparations of slavery. Only by connecting both elements, would a consensus be possible. What was the first thing to do?

It was to calm the US and Israel so that they did not use the question of the Middle East as an excuse to slam the door and leave the gathering. And to that end, it was advisable to strongly condemn the acts of hatred to which the Jewish participants were subject to. Facing these responsibilities, listening to our testimony, is the honest intent of Louis Michel.

From the outset, the Minister understands the hostility inflicted on us. He virulently condemns anti-Semitism. We remind him, for the sake of clarity, that there is a difference between Jews and Israelis. Jews are seen, in the collective consciousness of Durban, as the direct cause of Palestinian suffering. We are considered the last bastion of a fascist international order to be eliminated. Regaining the dignity of the oppressed people would only come around through our defeat.

We explain to the Minister that we are visiting him as Europeans. It is the very first time we are assaulted for being Jews and that we are counting on the credibility of Europe to keep cease these distortions. We explain that Durban is a perfect opportunity for the European Union to demonstrate its commitments to a strong common foreign policy, in line with its values. We are proud to be Europeans because every day at this conference, we understand a little better the common values shared by all Europeans: their reading of history, their respect for words, history and semantics, and their respect for diversity. Today, Europe defines its identity through its own diversity. And the essence of its diplomacy is ongoing dialogue, not only to respect diversity but to actively promote pluralism.

We also realise that most Jews in the world believe that Europe has not purged itself of its endemic anti-Semitism. Many Jewish activists consider that Europeans, as a whole, lack understanding of Israel's security concerns. Worse, European policies are occasionally hostile.

Our discussion with Louis Michel ends. The Minister, seeing that we appreciate his warm and comforting comments, adds a last sentence by way of conclusion: *«Between us, I personally have a lot of difficulty with Sharon. To my big regret, I am afraid that his actions foster anti-Semitism»*. Louis Michel probes us deliberately, trying to discover what we think of the Sharon government. As if he wants to ensure that we are not Zionist agents. *«It is necessary to understand that the Israeli government does not make things easy.»* So to be *«good Europeans»*, it is thus advisable to denounce the leaders of Jerusalem, lest we lose some of our credibility. This logic made us feel a bit uncomfortable. Michel's remark infers that if Israel led a more clement

policy towards the Palestinians, the excesses in Durban would not occur. In our view, racism is a disease. It is not the side effect of another disease: the policies of Sharon. To argue otherwise is stepping on dangerous ground because by following this logic to its conclusion, we are flirting with the thesis that a chain of causalities can rationally explain any anti-Semitism. Yet, we are not here to discuss Sharon's government. Each of us, within the delegation has his own political views, often very different, on the matter. Louis Michel should speak to the Israeli diplomats, if he has legitimate concerns regarding the renewal of violence in the region and the collapse of the peace process.

Louis Michel, representing the Presidency of the European Union, did assure us that he was going to protect us in such tense times. However, we left this meeting more confused than ever. On one hand, we were very proud to believe in Europe, in its ideals and potential, although we felt isolated, at times, because of our European convictions within the Jewish caucus. We were determined to continue trying to convince the Jewish world of the historic importance of the European integration. On the other had, one of the highest leaders of the European Union had inadvertently revealed some confusion when it came to explaining the root causes of this Durban hate-fest. That made us anxious.

20.00: The Youth Summit is about to close and its Declaration must be adopted. The young people had already presented their Declaration, but the adoption procedures turned out to be so vague, that many groups are still disputing the final text. Nobody knows what to do to improve the situation. Each regional entity meets up, to add this wording, remove that paragraph, and to table last minute amendments to the plenary session. Is this all in compliance with the procedure? Nobody can answer us. It is impossible to know which amendments will be subjected to the plenary session for adoption, or how their selection will be made.

A few metres away from the tent, I'm contemplating the meeting from afar, sitting next to Daphné, Marta and Diane. We collapse into chairs on the lawn for hours. Watching the sunset, we hear the echoes of voices of those who are protesting. They talk for hours. Finally, a Declaration on which the assembly has to vote, is distributed.

No paragraph is devoted to anti-Semitism. The term is curiously placed in a paragraph which begins with discrimination against Muslims. We would thus assume that anti-Semitism would apply to the Muslims. What can we do faced with such a linguistic and historic distortion?

On the conflict in the Middle East, the assembly rejects our proposal to «put an end to violence» and to encourage the resumption of peace negotiations between the parties. Instead, the text grants the Palestinians the right to defend themselves «by any means» against the Israeli occupation. Would suicide attacks thus be justifiable, as an instrument of defence?

These are the radical ideas that compose parts of the «youth civil society». The world tends to romanticise the spirits of the young militants- regardless of their extremist positions. As young Jews, we never manage to escape a certain degree of schizophrenia in our identity. Often perceived as progressive within the Jewish world on questions related to European integration or the peace process, we are still viewed as “neo-cons” in the eyes of the non-Jewish NGO world- at the service of the Sharon and Bush governments.

Then and there, we know what we must do. We will be the first ones to boycott the conference. Before Washington and Jerusalem withdraw from the intergovernmental conference. Before the Jewish boycott of the NGO conference.

As we move to the front stage of the room, we take over the microphone. «We cannot accept the inflammatory tone of this text» declares Diane, in front of an indifferent assembly. «We regret that the Youth Forum did not condemn the violence in the Middle East as well as all forms of incitement to hatred. We would have wished to call for a return to the negotiation table and a peaceful dialogue between Palestinians and Israelis».

We are struck by the indifference in the room. Some individuals in keffieh at least acknowledge our presence by booing us! But perhaps because of our impending departure, the great majority did not care about our position on the Middle East, which was essentially a call for peace. It was as if these young people, with whom we had tried to build a dialogue during those days, casually said to themselves: «Ah, the Jews are leaving. So what! You win some, you lose some». The audience continues to chitchat aimlessly. When Diane speaks, it's as if a technical announcement was being read in the background to inform the participants to gather their things after the meeting, because the bus would not go back twice.

I snatch back the microphone: «We would also like to recall that throughout this conference, we have been offended, intimidated, and harassed ... We have never experienced racism before coming here». Some people starting booing me. «You, Jews, are so paranoid, that you only speak about yourselves».

«Stop being so egocentric, we too have already experienced racism, that is why we are here!». «Well, we are now going to proceed to vote: who is in favour, who is against, who abstains?», the chairman casually states. Nobody tried to speak to us. It's time to leave this stupid stadium.

SATURDAY, SEPTEMBER 1st

15:00: At the NGO Forum, Fidel Castro delivers a closing speech that's lasts several hours. We are not the only ones to find it absurd that a dictator is granted the honour of concluding the forum. The participants from the former Soviet bloc are furious. The organisers of the conference, SANGOCO, made this political decision behind closed doors, without informing the members of the steering committee.

18:30: This is the first time that the fifty-eight members of the Jewish caucus are gathered at full strength in the stadium. The NGO Forum is about to adopt the final text of the Declaration and the Action Program of the NGO. Hundreds of people, representing forty-three caucuses, are gathered in the stadium to reach a final agreement. The closing meeting is chaotic. People get up, moan and groan, shout, and threaten to leave. The steering committee decides to adopt the text, despite the fact that the regions have not yet reached a consensus.

20:00: While we are nervously fidgeting in our seats, the chairman and the members of the steering committee on the podium openly confront each other on the rules of procedure. They do not know how to manage their questioning and look at the audience with a pleading eye. The scene is filled with ridicule. One NGO asks if a caucus may present last minute amendments. Reacting to the roars of the crowd, the chairman and the steering committee accept, «provided that there are new caucuses which present these amendments. » so that new associations may express their voices!

To present changes to texts, it is thus necessary to create a new group. Just like that, dozens of people rush towards the office to register new organisations created on the spot! The adoption of these new procedures is so absurd; why not live in this surrealist state to its end? I queue in the line and invent a name for my fictitious caucus. Let's definitely omit the word Jewish there. What about Youth Movement Against Racism ? It's the first name that comes to my mind. I am resolved to play the game if it allows the Jewish caucus to modify the draft text.

Half an hour later, the chairman revokes his decision, seeing the chaos around him. Everybody sits back down. The debate begins. Each caucus has the right to develop a paragraph on the origins of its own discrimination. Then, it has a right to take the floor and to present its final recommendations. Finally, the plenary proceeds to adopt the text.

21.50: The assembly adopts by vote the principle of the right of the victims to define their own form of discrimination. That way, each group, victimised by racism will be able to freely express its objectives in its own way.

22.00: Ten minutes after this key decision, an African delegate from the Ecumenical caucus requests the abolition of our paragraph on anti-Semitism, drafted by the Commission: «We are troubled by the prevalence of anti-Zionism and the attempts of delegitimising the State of Israel through the inept charge of genocide crimes, war crimes, crimes against humanity, ethnic cleansing and apartheid, any acts which we consider as obvious forms of anti-Semitism leading to the burning of synagogues, to the attacking of Jews, to the incitement to murder innocent people because of their support for the existence of Israel, their assertion of the right for self-determination of the Jewish people and the will through the State of Israel to protect their cultural and religious identity.» Our text condemns anti-zionist rhetoric, which incited in the previous year, violence against Jews and Jewish institutions worldwide. «I am against anti-Semitism, but I am also against the genocide of the Palestinians», the spokeswoman of the Ecumenical caucus declares. A roar of applause. The president immediately calls for a yes or no on the deletion of this paragraph. 42 voters. In favor: 39. Against: our yellow vote card solitarily floats over the crowd. At the time, nobody notices that the Central Europe caucus also raised its card, as did the representatives of the Romani caucus.

Under the sign of one of our Jewish colleagues, we stand up to leave the room. Confusion reigns in our heads. We begin shouting a slow but endless chant. «Shame. Shame. Shame. Shame. Shame. Shame.» These are our last words. We shout with all our might. We yell against all the minutes we endured in Durban since our arrival. We roar our anger at the crowd, who remain startled in silence for a fraction of a second. Then, the Palestinian caucus erupt with shouts of: «Free, Free Palestine!» One couldn't hear anything but the juxtaposition of these two chants: «Shame, shame!» «Free, free Palestine!» While crossing the tent, we see people cheerfully hugging each other in sign of victory. Others rush to take our empty seats.

We cross the stadium in a whirlwind. This is not the first time that we run out of fear of being physically attacked. But this time, fifty-eight Jews are concentrated in one place. It's dark and the tension is at its peak. There is an air of panic in our movements. As for me, I'm afraid that people will follow us, even attack us! I see our bodyguards near us. «Walk quickly, together, straight ahead. Do not expect the bus to come and find you. Continue walking.» They are very tense.

00.00: We discover afterwards that the disorder only got worse. The session became increasingly chaotic and unmanageable. The procedures were not respected at all. A little later in the evening, the Roma caucus got up and left the tent. They would be the first ones to take the microphone to announce that they could not subscribe to the text, which it is anti-Semitic.

The group from Central Europe did not immediately leave the room. They fought hard to include a passage on the wars in the Balkans and Chechnya and they wanted to see it through until the end of the meeting. Into the middle of the night, the participants began laboriously voting on every paragraph.

It was hot and raining and there was nothing to eat. When somebody brought some sandwiches, a Russian member, of Jewish origin, member of the Central Europe group, was asked if he was «a friend of Palestine». The experience was humiliating. Before he gave an answer, he could not get anything to eat. It was during this night that the group decided to draft a declaration to distance itself from the text.

In the early hours, the final text of the NGO Forum was adopted. Very few people stayed in the room.

According to Miroslav Prokes, a member of the International Organizational Committee, the steering committee had the right to refuse a posteriori, the illegal deletion of the paragraph on anti-Semitism. Yet, instead of considering that the rules of procedure had been violated, the steering committee drafted an explanatory text, stating that for «various reasons in this session, a different process emerged which had not been anticipated, but that it does not necessarily mean a violation of the rules of procedure».

Then, one of the biggest scandals of the conference in Durban broke out. Some members of the steering committee, accompanied by members of SAN-

GOCO and delegates of the Palestinian caucus, barged into an office closed to the public, where the drafting committee was finalising the NGO text to integrate the adopted amendments into it. The invaders demanded editorial changes to the explanatory text, as well as modifications of the section on anti-Semitism. The scene was violent. According to Miroslav Prokes, after some attempts to have a discussion, the drafting committee felt so intimidated that it left the workroom. The invaders then took charge of the completion of the NGO document.

Nobody spoke about this incident to the press. Moreover, numerous participants left Durban the next day without having been aware of this episode. In the final version of the document, as it is published today, the definition of anti-Semitism is diluted to include the discrimination of other peoples there, such as the Palestinians. Islamophobia is also considered as a form of anti-Semitism. Besides, Israel is accused of «war crimes and of acts of genocide» It is qualified as a «racist nation» and the text calls to apply to it «all the measures taken against the South Africa apartheid regime», meaning an embargo and the suspension of all diplomatic, economic and social ties. The document also calls for the launching of an international campaign against the Apartheid movement in Israel, «to break the silence of the Nations, in particular the European Union and the United States». The NGO declaration also calls to restore the UN resolution 3379 assimilating Zionism to racism. Later, the High Commissioner, Mary Robinson will announce that, for the first time in the history of the United Nations, she cannot recommend the NGO document to the governments.

SUNDAY, SEPTEMBER 2nd

With the NGO forum, the governmental conference opened. Our role ends quietly.

Our last meeting is with Walter Schwimmer, the Secretary General of the Council of Europe. He listens to us with great respect and kindness. During his speech at the intergovernmental conference, he describes our experience. This man represents a Europe deeply aware of its history: firm in its moral integrity and not shy to defend its values.

SEPTEMBER 11th

We are on planes all day. Durban-Johannesburg-Paris-Milan-Brussels... I'm drenched in fatigue but it's impossible to sleep. The adrenalin is still profusely flowing. We feel as if we are returning from a war. Welcome back to the lucid, peaceful, free world! There will be no more security concerns, no more bodyguards, no drivers who take us to the stadiums, filled with groups of hateful imbeciles! What shall we do tomorrow? We dream of spending a lazy day in some of Brussels nicest cafés. Let's definitely not read any book on radicalism, the UN or anti-Semitism...

But how are we going to share this story with our relatives and friends? What will we do with this experience?

We finally land in Brussels. Marta is coming to sleep at my house. As soon as we get through the door, we turned on the TV to unpack our bags to the joyful sound of MTV. But the remote control persistently stops on CNN. «Live from the CNN Center in Atlanta, bringing you the story, a plane has just crashed into one of the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center...Stay with us and we'll continue our live coverage, after the break». Advertisement break. What? The Pentagon too? The second tower? Flames? War scenes in New York City? All that smoke? This is impossible!

For me, as well as for all the Jews present in Durban, there is a clear connection between the attacks on the Twin Towers and the hatred we had experienced a few days back. We imagined a sort of world conspiracy. How could the chain of events not be linked? The madness of Durban had spread like a virus. After the alienation of the Jews, the entire globe will be disorientated. In Durban, all the ingredients were there: virulent anti-Americanism, hatred of the Jews, Islamist networks, -of which the outreach was still unknown- a clash between values. Although there was no link, we did learn, -in a sense, prematurely- that the conjunction of all these elements could change the world in which we lived.

My second spontaneous reaction followed. I imagined the faces of the Hamas and Hezbollah representatives who were freely distributing their pamphlets at the stadium. «Well, obviously», I said to myself in a blasé tone, «If these kind of guys can march past the nose of Mary Robinson's and call for jihad at the UN, then why couldn't others hijack a plane?»

A few days later, we began to sink into reality. Clarity of mind returned, accompanied by many new questions in a post Durban, post 9/11 world.

SEPTEMBER 12th

Final scene, the newsagents store in front of my house.

After the attacks of September 11th, I hurry to go and buy a newspaper before the special editions are sold out. I wait in line at the shop. A Belgian of African origin is chatting with the salesman behind the counter. They are discussing Durban and 9/11. «After all, what happened to those Americans is well deserved! The Americans are racists because they boycotted a world conference against racism. No wonder, we are all going to attack racists» he adds, satisfied with his analysis. The salesman chuckles. They change topics and share the latest gossip of the neighbourhood.

These are the first words, the first spontaneous reactions that I hear since my return to Brussels. I have the same feeling as I did back in Durban. The comments of the first guy bother me. They could have been uttered at the stadium by a delegate laughing. The second guy, the salesman behind the counter, brought me back to all the nonchalant people whom we ran into in Durban, in the plenary session and the workshop tents.

The events of Durban were overshadowed by the dramatic events of the 11 September. However, the core problems raised in this text remain -amidst a new international context, which bears its own new questions, new confusions and new complexities.

Joëlle FISS

Thanks to all those who participated in reconstructing this story: Daphné Tepper, Marta Mucznik, Diane Sheinberg, Julian Voloj, Ronald Eissens, Yehuda Kay, Malika Marcovich, Cathy Fitzpatrick, Maria Miguel Sierra, Suzette Bronkhorst, Anne Bayefsky. Thanks to the Shapiro family for being wonderful hosts in Durban. Thanks to Bernard Henri-Levy who encouraged me to write this story and who published it first in its original French version in 2004. And last but not least, a special thanks to the European Union of Jewish Students whose current leadership, courage and idealism remains a true example to the Jewish world of NGOs.

THE DURBAN DIARIES

What really happened at the UN Conference Against Racism in Durban (2001)

By Joelle Fiss

The Durban Diaries is a detailed account of what happened to members of the Jewish caucus participating in the World Conference Against Racism (WCAR), in 2001 in Durban. This is a day by day -and sometimes hour by hour- testimony from former EUJS chairperson Joëlle Fiss, who led the delegation of Jewish student activists to the conference. The WCAR turned into a disastrous failure: many NGOs trampled on the fundamental values of the United Nations, as well as on the principles of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Ironically, it was in the name of anti-racism that the conference turned into a spectacle of hatred and of demonisation: it even re-awakened a entire panoply of anti-Semitic stereotypes long forgotten.

The fight for a just Durban Review Conference has already begun and EUJS is committed to take the lead, on behalf of all European Jewish students, to ensure that respect for human rights will be ensured throughout the entire process. EUJS has decided to publish The Durban Diaries as a historical document that reconstructs the facts around that happened at the initial UN World Conference Against Racism and by doing so, we also aim to create awareness of the challenges that lie ahead.

The European Union of Jewish Students sincerely wants to thank Joëlle Fiss and the ISSN Foundation for making the publication of this booklet possible.

Jonas Karpantschof, Chairperson of EUJS



The European Union of Jewish Students
3 avenue Antoine Depage, 1000 Brussels, Belgium
www.eujs.org

Edited by Joelle Fiss
Translated from French by
Designed by Arielle Herzog

Distributed by EUJS
Sponsored by
ISSN ISSN Foundation