

US to boycott UN racism conference

By Matthew Lee and Edith M. Lederer

Associated Press

February 27, 2009

WASHINGTON— The Obama administration said Friday that the United States will boycott an upcoming U.N. conference on racism unless its final document is changed to drop all references to Israel and the defamation of religion.

At the same time, it said the U.S. would participate as an observer in meetings of the U.N. Human Rights Council, a body that was shunned by the Bush administration for anti-Israel statements and failing to act on abuses in Sudan and other states.

The racism conference is a follow-up to the contentious 2001 meeting in the South African city of Durban that was dominated by clashes over the Middle East and the legacy of slavery.

The U.S. and Israel walked out midway through that meeting over a draft resolution that singled out Israel for criticism and likened Zionism—the movement to establish and maintain a Jewish state—to racism.

Israel and Canada had already announced they would will boycott the next World Conference Against Racism in Geneva from April 20-25, known as Durban II, but the Obama administration decided it wanted to assess the negotiations before making a decision on U.S. participation.

Last week, the State Department sent a team to Geneva to attend preparatory meetings for the conference but on Friday it said the closing statement under consideration mirrored the 2001 draft and was unacceptable.

"Sadly ... the document being negotiated has gone from bad to worse, and the current text of the draft outcome document is not salvageable," spokesman Robert Wood said in a statement.

"As a result, the United States will not engage in further negotiations on this text, nor will we participate in a conference based on this text," he said.

The United States will not take part in the conference unless its final statement does not single out any one country or conflict for criticism nor embrace the draft's stance on the condemnation or take up the issue of reparations for slavery, Wood said.

"We would be prepared to re-engage if a document that meets these criteria becomes the basis for deliberations," he said.

Israel, which was deeply concerned when the administration sent a delegation to the preparatory meeting, lobbied hard for the U.S. to stay away from the conference and pro-Israel groups hailed the decision.

"President Obama's decision not to send U.S. representation to the April event is the right thing to do and underscores America's unstinting commitment to combating intolerance and racism in all its forms and in all settings," the American Israel Public Affairs Committee said.

"Its a clear signal to the international community that this administration refuses to validate the hijacking of human rights by regimes led by Libya and Iran," said the Simon Wiesenthal Center, referring to countries that are supporting the draft statement.

U.S. officials said they are pressing European nations to boycott the conference unless there are revisions to the final statement. The Netherlands and France have already expressed concern about the contents.

Howard Berman, chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, said he hoped the U.S. position "will galvanize like-minded countries and those who have been sitting on the sidelines to end this mindless march toward an outcome that serves none of the victims of racism, xenophobia and intolerance."

Although it announced the boycott of the Durban II conference, the State Department also said it would attend, as an observer, meetings of the U.N. Human Rights Council that the United States had previously stayed away from of criticism of Israel it said was one-sided.

Despite those concerns, Wood said the Obama administration believes that "it furthers our interests and will do more (to) advance human rights if we are part of the conversation and present at the councils proceedings."

"These times demand seriousness and candor, and we pledge to closely work with our partners in the international community to avoid politicization and to achieve our shared goals," he said.

The Obama administration had declined to speak during the council's review earlier this month of the human rights records of China, Russia and other countries the United States has previously criticized for abuses.