B’NAI B’RITH AIRS CONCERNS AT DURBAN PREPARATORY MEETING IN GENEVA

(Geneva, Switzerland, October 13, 2008) – Representatives of B’nai B’rith International’s Council on United Nations Affairs, participating in preparations for the Durban Review Conference in April 2009, are working to ensure that the conference does not disintegrate into a platform for anti-Semitism, as did the first Durban conference in 2001. BBI is actively participating in the Durban Preparatory Committee (PrepCom) meetings, scheduled for October 6-17, 2008.

Stated Ambassador Joseph E. Harari, BBI Chairman of U.N. Affairs, “In order to ensure that these discussions have value, it is important for countries that are serious about human rights and democracy to promote a firm, principled stand in the course of negotiations. States must work to combat rather than promote any form of racism.”

BBI has urged member states to declare openly and repeatedly that they will reject any outcome document that:

1. Reopens the 2001 Durban Declaration and Program of Action (DDPA), such as by new provisions on “defamation of religion,” or restrictions on freedom of speech in the name of religion;
2. Pays disproportionate attention to only selected topics of the DDPA to the detriment of other important issues in the document, particularly by placing a hierarchy on forms of bias; and finally,
3. Singles out any U.N. member state, people, or geographic situation, above all others or in any way promotes a different set of standards for the Jewish people and state than it does for other peoples or states.

Both the European Union (E.U.) and the United Kingdom provided constructive statements during the PrepCom’s opening. The E.U. produced an important regional document that emphasized the need to remember the lessons from the Holocaust and to fight Holocaust denial and anti-Semitism. In contrast, the Asian regional group released an offensive report which accused Israel of a number of crimes including apartheid and genocide. The document echoed the conference’s mistakes of 2001 by indulging in anti-Semitic venom. The document adopted by the African regional conference did recognize the dangers of anti-Semitism, which is unusual for the region. However, it also
inappropriately singled out the Palestinian situation. Likewise, the submission by the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC) contained highly problematic language, singling out Israel, and seeking to restrict freedom of speech in the name of protecting religion.

B’nai B’rith is represented at the PrepCom by an international team from Switzerland, France, and the United Kingdom. Klaus Netter, BBI’s main Geneva representative, is leading the delegation which includes Joëlle H. Perelberg, BBI Executive Committee member; Jacques Jacubert, President B’nai B’rith France; and Elizabeth Harris and Samantha Cohen of the Board of Deputies of British Jews, who have joined the BBI delegation as part of our umbrella organization, the Coordinating Board of Jewish Organizations (CBJO).

On October 6, BBI, the CBJO, and the British Board of Deputies made a joint statement before the committee, thanking the High Commissioner for Human Rights for her opening statement that addressed the anti-Semitism that was evident in the 2001 Durban conference. In the statement, BBI went on to address concerns with the language in the documents coming into the PrepCom.

The statement made on October 6, went as follows:

Madam Chair,

Firstly I wish to thank the High Commissioner for her balanced opening statement to the plenary.

On behalf of the CBJO and B’nai Brith International, I would like to express our concern about the fact that two regional input documents have seen fit to single out one and only one geographic issue among the dozens of issues treated by these documents, namely the problems related to the Middle East conflict involving the Palestinian people.

It is our hope that this selectivity will find no place in the final outcome document of this session, so as to avoid diverting the attention of The Durban Review Conference from the true and manifold problems of racism, racial discrimination and xenophobia around the world.

Madam chair,

We are also concerned that the issue of defamation of religion, which is alleged to defend the freedom of religious expression will be extended to an abridgement of the right of free speech allowing criticism of ideologies and practices of specific religious groups. Whilst religious expression by individuals deserves to be
defended against discrimination in the outcome document, this principle should not be abused to limit the right of free speech regarding religious institutions.

Representatives of B’nai B’rith will continue to advocate from the floor at the PrepCom, and make more interventions as warranted.

**Celebrating B’nai B’rith International’s 165 years and Israel’s 60 years in 2008.**

*B’nai B’rith International, the Global Voice of the Jewish Community, is the oldest and most widely known Jewish humanitarian, human rights, and advocacy organization. Since 1843, BBI has worked for Jewish unity, security, continuity, and tolerance. Visit [www.bnaibrith.org](http://www.bnaibrith.org).***

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