B’nai B’rith International Calls Upon UN Assembly at Durban Review Conference to Stand against Terrorism and for Human Rights

(April 29, 2009)—B’nai B’rith International (BBI) Honorary President and Head of Delegation Richard D. Heideman; Chairman of the Council on U.N. Affairs Ambassador Joseph E. Harari; Senior International Vice President Jacobo Wolkowicz; and Executive Vice President Daniel S. Mariaschin led a delegation of 50 members from 11 countries at the United Nations Durban Review Conference in Geneva. The group comprised the largest Jewish non-government organization (NGO) delegation at the conference.

The delegation included Klaus Netter and Armand Azoulai, who serve as BBI Permanent Representatives in Geneva, monitoring the Human Rights Council activities on a year-round basis; Aaron Etra, vice chairman of the council; Director of U.N. and Intercommunal Affairs David Michaels; representatives from B’nai B’rith Europe; and other B’nai B’rith leaders from the United States, Israel, France, Panama, Germany, Uruguay, Mexico, Italy, and Switzerland, among other nations.

On the conference’s final day, Heideman addressed the conference chairman. “This Review Conference will forever be remembered - and blemished - by the hate speech that we witnessed not outside, but on the very podium of this Conference by the man who had been afforded the honour of first place among the High-Level speakers,” Heideman said in a statement. “In summary, Mr. Chairman, we do not believe that a single victim of racism, racial discrimination and xenophobia will have reason to find solace from this process filled with pious declarations of intent... To the delegates assembled here, we say we can and must do better to protect Human Rights.” Click here to read the full text of Heideman’s remarks.

Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad’s anti-Semitic speech on the opening day of the conference, referenced by Heideman, proved to be a lightning rod, as many diplomats – including members of each of the remaining 23 countries in the European Union and the B’nai B’rith delegates – walked out on the diatribe.

Several countries, including the United States, Israel, Canada, Germany, Italy, Poland, Australia, New Zealand, the Czech Republic, and Holland, decided to withdraw support from the conference. B’nai B’rith applauds these nations for declining to participate in what inevitably decayed into an anti-Semitic summit. B’nai B’rith Canada worked closely with the Canadian government to orchestrate that nation’s boycott of the conference.

The conference regrettably devolved into what was expected – a reaffirmation of the 2001 Durban declaration, which unfairly asserted that Palestinians are subject to Israeli “racism.” The outcome document of the review conference echoes that idea.

“We condemn this rubber-stamp document in the strongest terms possible,” Heideman said from Geneva. “The adoption of this document shows nothing has changed since 2001, no lessons have been learned – and the hope for a unified approach to fighting racism and intolerance around the world will again go unfulfilled.”

While in Geneva, members of the delegation conducted bilateral advocacy meetings with U.N. member-state representatives, including Italy, France, Mexico, and Israel, also closely monitoring Durban proceedings as well as side events. The group also spoke with emissaries from the Swiss foreign ministry to express dissatisfaction with the president of Switzerland receiving Ahmadinejad.
Heideman also spoke earlier in the week on behalf of B’nai B’rith at a press event with a coalition of international Jewish organizations.

On April 20, the BBI delegation took part in a mass Yom HaShoah commemoration outside the U.N. building in Geneva, featuring Holocaust survivor and Nobel laureate Elie Wiesel. On April 21, BBI joined in highlighting the ongoing atrocities in Darfur. The April 23 schedule included a B’nai B’rith co-sponsored human rights program and a pro-Israel symposium and rally featuring such figures as legendary Russian dissident Natan Sharansky, acclaimed author and advocate Alan Dershowitz, Canadian parliamentarian and former justice minister Irwin Cotler, and French public intellectual Bernard-Henri Levy, which was attended by several hundred people. Mariaschin also chaired a panel on Israel’s record of humanitarianism.

In addition, BBI representatives also met with Italian delegates at their Permanent Mission to thank them for their leadership in creating a dialogue with other European countries and setting the stage for the European Union walk out during Ahmadinejad’s hateful speech.

In the months leading up to the conference, it became increasingly clear that the 2009 event would focus negatively on Israel, like its 2001 predecessor. With Israel and Canada, and then the United States, leading the way, other nations began to recognize the reality of what the so-called racism conference would become.

“We are encouraged that more countries spoke out against the anti-Israel tone presented in the conference document,” said B’nai B’rith International (BBI) Executive Vice President Daniel S. Mariaschin. “We hope that their choosing not to participate in the conference will shed light on the injustices taking place. In that spirit, B’nai B’rith believes it is vital for organizations such as ours to be present at events like the Durban Review Conference so that we can serve as watchdogs and speak out against the injustices taking place on behalf of those absent.”

Mariaschin and Heideman co-authored an Op-Ed in regard to the conference, which was published by the Jewish Telegraph Agency.