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Promoting pluralism and human rights around the world  
irrespective of race, ethnicity, religion or political opinion.

**SHRG's Statement to the Inter-Sessional Open-Ended Working Group on  
The World Conference Against Racism. Geneva, 6-9 March 2001.**

Thank you Madam Chairperson,

SHRG commends the High Commissioner for a far reaching and exhaustive Draft Declaration and Programme of Action for the World Conference. We can state with satisfaction that many of our concerns and proposals are reflected in this Declaration. The Sikh Human Rights Group supports the position that all humanity is one and classifications are mostly artificial constructs that have emerged with the use of cultural and political designs to exclude and dominate. We question the basis of terms such as race, racism and racial discrimination and feel that a more thorough analysis needs to be pursued to unravel the multiple definitions conflated within these terms and their usefulness to human society. Nevertheless we acknowledge, with some reservation, that the terminology has come into common usage and states and communities have adopted it as a language of classification and social interaction. We therefore address our concerns and proposals with all this in mind.

There exists considerable literature on cultural diversity and culture as an integral part of racial distinction, but very little has been done to incorporate this knowledge into the legal practices of states. *The International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination* states, "... 'Racial discrimination' shall mean any distinction, exclusion, restriction or preference based on race, colour, descent or national or ethnic origin which has the purpose or effect of nullifying or impairing the recognition, employment or exercise, on an equal footing, of human rights and fundamental freedoms in the political, economic, social, cultural or any other field of public life".

Nevertheless, the legal systems in many countries around the world tend to treat race as a biological issue. In this sense, government policies have changed to accommodate colour and to some extent descent but not the respect and active protection of people's cultural identities. Indeed, Sikhs, Hindus and Muslims in Europe, Aborigines in Australia, Afro-Brazilians, Ismailis in Pakistan, Sikhs and Muslim groups in India, Mayas in Central America, and many other minority ethnic groups, refugees, asylum seekers and trafficked people around the world still experience discrimination in their everyday life and minimal or no protection against such violations. In particular, cultural practices of many minority ethnic groups are treated as religious matters outside the scope of the discourse on race.

With the creation of an ambiguous definition of race, there follows an attempt to tailor it in a manner that suits political interests. Cultural discrimination is usually pursued under legislation for protection of religion rather than Race legislations. In some countries however, such protection does not exist. Hence, ethnic groups such as the Sikhs still face discrimination in places of employment and social interaction because of their cultural practices such as maintaining of kara, kirpan and the kesh.

If we are to adopt the term race in common usage we have to accept that race and culture are intimately related and cannot be segregated. Culture is an integral part of social identity and its respect is crucial for the equal and peaceful co-existence of different peoples. Nevertheless, cultural prejudice manifests itself with the use of stereotypes such as the ones that label people with a particular cultural identity as exceedingly religious, orthodox or fundamentalists. Without a remedy against acts of cultural discrimination and exclusion, in places of social interaction, institutions and the media, this type of abusive practices become institutionalised through their inclusion in the official discourse on culture. In this way they become legitimate.

Discrimination and racism occur primarily because people are fearful of 'the different'. In this sense, people that come from different cultures are perceived as a threat to what is thought to be a 'homogenous national culture'. Diversity is perceived as a threat because homogeneity is being treated as an indication of 'normality' while diversity is approached as a result of the 'invasion' of the different into the 'homogenous' whole. However, if a thorough look into human history and today's world can convince people that diversity and not homogeneity is the starting point of a dynamic process that involves a wide variety of perspectives, ways of life, individual and communal identities and economico-political circumstances that blend together and change through time; then diversity will cease being perceived as a threat and it will be approached as an opportunity for the equal and peaceful co-existence of different peoples. Indeed as the Draft Declaration has suggested and our own brief declaration proposes, world history is the richer for this diversity.

Within the discourse on racism and discrimination, cultural diversity is encouraged through the act of 'tolerance'. Yet, this approach does not necessarily promote the co-existence of different cultures on an equal basis. The concept of 'tolerance' suggests merely a political 'recognition and accommodation' of different ways of being while it still presupposes cultural homogeneity of the 'nation-state' and assimilation of the minority cultures into the majority, 'tolerant' one. An alternative to the passive practice of 'tolerance' would be the active promotion of the more inclusive and dynamic concept of 'cultural diversity' that promotes respect for different cultures and protection of their rights on the basis of the human rights principles.

In summary, SHRG supports the Draft Declaration and Programme of Action for the World Conference yet expresses its reservation on the use of the terms race, racism and racial discrimination. SHRG maintains the belief that race and culture are intimately related and that cultural diversity is the key to future peace and prosperity amongst peoples and states. It emphasises the need to actively promote cultural diversity in state policies as a way of dealing with racial discrimination, intolerance and xenophobia. SHRG hopes that the High Commissioner will review the approach of cultural diversity through 'tolerance' in favour of the more active and equalitarian alternative of the direct promotion of cultural diversity. We again commend the High Commission's office for a thought provoking and exhaustive declaration.

I thank you for your attention

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