

Monthly Review Book Review by Bill Fletcher, Jr
Dispatches from Durban

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It was as if someone pushed a giant delete button. The United Nations World Conference Against Racism (WCAR), held August–September 2001, was one of the most important conferences and social mobilizations to take place in years. Voices from the global South decried the continued presence of racism and xenophobia. Thousands of people assembled in Durban, South Africa with great symbolic importance after the successful anti-apartheid struggle.

And then, with September 11, 2001, it all seemed to vanish. The debates that had raged in Durban; the unprincipled stand of the United States using the Palestinian question to avoid dealing with reparations; the emergence of a discussion about reparations for Africa—in a few moments it was all swept aside with the terror attacks and President Bush’s subsequent “war against terrorism.”

Dispatches from Durban, a powerful new book by Los Angeles-based activist and theoretician Eric Mann, reminds us of the excitement and importance of the UN World Conference Against Racism. Through a collection of firsthand commentaries, Mann provides insight into the issues of racism and white supremacy, the role of the U.S. government in the conference, the nature of and contradictions within the United Nations, as well as the implications of neoliberalism for the struggles for genuine national liberation. As such, Mann helps the reader appreciate the context of the WCAR, and especially why progressive and anti-imperialist forces world-wide chose it as a point of concentration for a major mobilization.

What excited me about the book was Mann’s ability to demonstrate the continued relevance of this mobilization and the deliberations to the contemporary situation. In this regard, *Dispatches from Durban* is of more than historical value. As attention has been focused on the UN in the midst of the Bush administration’s push for war against Iraq, Mann details the cynical and disruptive role of the United States in attempting to sidetrack and ultimately undermine the WCAR.

Had the 9/11 terror attacks not taken place, the Bush administration would certainly have sought some means of deflecting attention away from the discussions in Durban about genocide, the African slave trade, white supremacy, and the demands for reparations. September 11 certainly made this job easier and there has been almost no discussion of the WCAR since.

Ironically, the fact that the Bush “war against terrorism” has so little resonance in the global South—Africa, Asia, Latin America—is directly tied to issues debated at the WCAR. The one-sided and uncritical U.S. support of Israel against the Palestinians; the hypocritical condemnation of clerical fascist terrorism while the United States supports selective state-sponsored terrorism by its allies; the conservative domestic political

agenda—are all issues that did not appear only after 9/11. Variations on these themes were debated in the lead up to Durban and continue to be debated in its aftermath. Unfortunately, with so much attention on the war against terrorism and with war drums beating against Iraq, the larger discussion has become defused.

While *Dispatches from Durban* is well-written and a must-read, Mann errs in attempting to do too much in one book. The actual commentaries are sharp, both in style and in analysis. Toward the very end of the book, however, Mann merges in some more comprehensive essays that seem a bit disconnected. Clearly, Mann was attempting to demonstrate the on-going relevance of Durban and the manner in which lessons from that conference could directly apply to work which progressive forces must undertake in the United States. The objective is noble, but the result was a bit uneven.

Nevertheless, I was drawn into *Dispatches from Durban* and found myself pondering a series of questions regarding strategy and the world situation. Mann's words have kept me thinking since closing the final pages of this book.

No pun intended, but that speaks volumes.