

# ORANGE COUNTY EDITION

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## We Can't Hide From Hate

By RUSTY KENNEDY

Orange County's rapid growth in the 1950s and '60s was fueled in part by a desire to escape the problems of the city. My parents left the poverty, violence and congestion of South Central Los Angeles in 1952 for the middle-class dream of our own house on a quarter-acre lot in Fullerton.

By the '80s and '90s, many were escaping the congestion of central Orange County for the gated communities of South County. This same desire to withdraw behind barriers from the problems of the world is evident in our nation in spite of its obvious short-range effectiveness and profound consequences.

A week before the World Trade Center and Pentagon attacks demonstrated our vulnerability as a country, the United Nations convened the World Conference Against Racism. The United States delegation walked out, in part because of a dispute over Israel.

As the last remaining superpower, the United States also was reluctant to compromise when issues such as reparations for slavery, the evils of colonialism and globalization, and the Middle East conflict took center stage.

Three days after the conference in Durban, South Africa, was concluded, the world was shaken by the most destructive terrorist attack in history. That Sept. 11 attack gave us new motivation to examine our international relationships and our need to work with diverse governments and peoples, even when we don't get everything we want. It showed us how small and interrelated our world really is.

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In Durban I learned that when it comes to racism, xenophobia and related intolerance, many countries would rather find a reason to back away from the table than look at their own transgressions.

I heard the Indian ambassador condemn the thought of the United Nations discussing the Hindu caste system as "totally inappropriate" and akin to "social engineering." Yet I met a fine man who told me of his life as a Dalit, or untouchable, and who is, by virtue of the caste he is born into, forbidden even to step on the shadow of the upper class. His only hope for equality is in his "next life," after reincarnation.

The ambassador to Mauritania invited me to his suite at the Hilton to explain that, contrary to a "60 Minutes" report, there is no slavery in his country. Later that day at lunch, the vice president of the Mauritania Human Rights Commission told me that she knew the ambassador and his family and that they had held slaves for many

generations.

Many countries had issues that they didn't want discussed in front of the whole world. China didn't want the oppression of the Tibetan people and their religion discussed. The Europeans didn't want the plight of the Roma (formerly known as Gypsy) children exposed. The Pakistani government tried to keep the mention of hate and bigotry toward gays and lesbians out of the official declaration of human dignity. Just as the United States didn't want slavery declared a crime against humanity and Israel didn't want their state criticized for the plight of Palestinians.

So, trying to forge a worldwide consensus on a plan of action to fight racism, xenophobia and related intolerance is an uphill battle. Just as in a neighborhood dispute between officials and community activists, the first thing on the agenda is the perceived injustices committed years or even decades earlier. We learned it is hard to move forward on the problems of

the day until proper apologies are uttered for yesterday.

The tough thing for those of us who are the most privileged is taking responsibility for acts that we benefited from but did not commit. These are acts that systematically hurt and cheated others but that ultimately formed the cornerstones of our affluence.

It is hard to understand and impossible to forgive the hateful fury that resulted in the taking of thousands of innocent lives on Sept. 11, but it is emblematic of the anger that many harbor against the United States.

If we are to fight effectively those who would foment such hate toward us, the United Nations World Conference Against Racism is the kind of forum we cannot afford to walk away from. It is in the give-and-take process of consensus building in which we admit and apologize for our mistakes of the past and partner with other nations to visualize and plan a world where all people are safe, free and treated with dignity.

This must include Orange County, where we need to reach out across our gates to our neighbors and see their suffering as our concern.

As Mary Robinson, former president of Ireland and chair of the United Nations World Conference Against Racism, said in Durban, "Civil society has gathered here to make human dignity and equality not just hopes, but reality."

*Rusty Kennedy is executive director of the Orange County Human Relations Commission and was a delegate to the United Nations World Conference Against Racism, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance.*