

## **U.N. Rights Chief hopes U.S., Canada Attend Racism Meet**

GENEVA (Reuters) - The United Nations is pushing the United States and Canada to drop their concerns about a conference on racism and take part in the meeting later this month, the U.N. human rights chief said Thursday.

Navi Pillay, U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights, said she expected the United States to decide soon whether to take part, following a decision by President Barack Obama's administration to seek membership of the U.N.'s Human Rights Council.

The South African judge said she also written to Canada's foreign minister Wednesday urging Ottawa to participate.

Pillay told a news conference she welcomed Obama's decision to seek a U.S. seat this year on the 47-member council, reversing a move by his predecessor George W. Bush when the body was set up three years ago to promote human rights.

"I see that in line with his immediate decision to close Guantanamo and that means to engage and advance human rights not only in the United States but all over the world," she said, referring to the prison at the U.S. naval base in Cuba where the United States holds foreign terrorism suspects.

The April 20-24 meeting in Geneva will review a racism conference held in 2001 in Durban, South Africa, and discuss how to implement its conclusions.

The United States and Israel walked out of the Durban meeting in protest over efforts to pass a resolution comparing Zionism to racism, amid street marches targeting Jews.

The final declaration adopted by consensus by 189 countries did not include such references. It was hailed by Israel's then foreign minister Shimon Peres as a "very important achievement."

Council members Israel and Canada have both said they will not take part in the review meeting, known as Durban II, and the United States said in February, after

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attending some preparatory work, that it would stay away because it disagreed with language in the draft final document.

But after some European states threatened to walk away too, diplomats reworked the draft to remove references to Israel and to religious defamation -- an issue that Western countries fear could be used to restrict freedom of speech.

Pillay said the U.S. decision in February had been worded in a way that did not rule out possible participation.

"The statement carefully leaves it open for their re-engagement if clauses that they identify as contentious.. are out of the picture. Now those are out of the picture," she said.

"I expect them to make a decision soon."

The removal of the language on defamation or religion and Israel should also clear the way for Canada to take part, she said.

Pillay said she was particularly keen for Canada to be in the conference so that other countries could learn from its practices of dealing with indigenous peoples.

(Reporting by Jonathan Lynn; Editing by Stephanie Nebehay)