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on issues affecting African Americans
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**Reflections on Racism
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Barack Obama feels able to counsel others - most recently Armenians and Turks - to work through their pasts "in a way that is honest, open and constructive." Otherwise, he cautions, unresolved history "can be a heavy weight." And yet Obama decided to leave his own country's past unresolved by boycotting this week's international conference in Geneva, convened to review progress (or otherwise) since the World Conference Against Racism held in Durban, South Africa in 2001.

This is a big step back from engagement with the international community, which the Obama administration had seemed to be promoting quite vigorously. And the U.S. move has encouraged other Western nations to boycott, further weakening what should have been an important forum.

All peoples of all colors have practiced slavery, race, oppression, and/or discrimination with varying ferocity. These are uncomfortable subjects at the best of times, but that's no reason not to talk about them. Otherwise, they are indeed a heavy weight.

Besides, by boycotting the conference, the United States is unlikely to stop the international movement for justice for the Palestinian people or end African American demands for reparations for slavery - two of the main reasons why the administration is said to have decided not to go.

Even though the U.S. administration is not participating in the Durban Review Conference in Geneva, Americans and others can still take a moment for some personal reflection.

Why does racism still lurk within so many of them? Or, rather, within so many of us - few members of the human race are immune. And what actions can people take when governments don't act?

A first step in dealing with the racist within is to become more conscious of the use of language.

Among Arab Americans, for example, it is common to hear the expression "She's pretty, even though she's dark." Or "Whiten our face," meaning, "Do us proud." When the implications are pointed out to them, some resist the accusation; others do change their speech and behavior.

At the same time, Black Americans account for the largest ethnic group among Muslims in America, some 30% of the total. The religion's openness to embrace races and ethnicities is an aspect of Islam that is not sufficiently acknowledged in the U.S. public sphere.

Among Black Americans, a shared experience of oppression does not necessarily translate into race-free relations. There are tensions between diverse ethnicities; different values are attached to skin shades and hair types. As her husband's race for the presidency grew more serious, Michelle Obama's hair grew straighter, part of a makeover grounded in a belief that Americans still ascribe a lower value to "kinky" hair.

The truth is, even as people struggle valiantly against slavery, racism, and colonialism, the features of the oppressor can insidiously come to be seen as superior. Conscious effort is needed not just to promote emancipation and end Jim Crow laws but also to change social mores.

For many peoples, the struggle against colonialism has created a strong sense of solidarity. In a recent example, powerful for its symbolism, South African dockworkers in Durban, outraged by the attack on Gaza, refused to offload goods on a ship from Israel.

Many Black Americans have also supported the Palestinian struggle, some putting their careers at risk to do so. Although Arab American organizations reach out to Black, Latino and other communities, the Arab American community itself does not yet express sufficient understanding of and support for Black, Latino or other minority causes.

Prison would be a good place to start working on shared solidarity. The United States has the world's largest prison population - over 2.3 million people are in jail. Black Americans account for a disproportionate number of prisoners: one of every 15 Black adults is in jail.

Palestinians could certainly resonate to these data. Some 11,000 Palestinian prisoners are in Israeli jails. It is said that nearly a quarter of the population has been jailed by Israel during its 42-year occupation.

As both communities know to their cost, the larger the number of the people oppressed, the more invisible they are. Many people know the name of Israel's sole

prisoner in Palestinian hands; hardly anyone outside of their families can name one of the 11,000 Palestinian prisoners.

And people find it far easier to blame the victim than the perpetrators or the conditions that create victim hood. Racist explanations abound as to why so many Black Americans are in jail.

Discussions of race and oppression are often divisive and disruptive, but the road to freedom and real equality begins there. The Obama administration, which speaks so often of seeking justice at home and abroad, has set us all back with the roadblock it erected on the road to the Durban review conference. The real heroes of Durban are the South African dockworkers.

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