

Young Ambassadors of Intercultural Dialogue

Mahitab Abdel Raouf

Journalist

Middle East News Agency (MENA), Cairo

The year 2006 witnessed a number of youth events in the Mediterranean Region. These meetings organised by Euro-Mediterranean foundations in charge of intercultural dialogue prove that there is hope for the renewal of genuine dialogue among civilisations. Considerable efforts were made to bring together young people from all over the Mediterranean Basin, the ultimate aim being to mitigate certain chronic conflicts in the world by placing our hopes on youth.

Overview of Euro-Mediterranean Meetings

In June 2006, the European Commission, in collaboration with the SALTO-Youth EuroMed Resource Centre (located at the National Institute for Youth and Non-Formal Education –INJEP, in France), organised the EuroMed 2006 Meeting, convening the different actors of the EuroMed Youth Programme. The participants unanimously expressed their wish to consolidate cooperation and partnership among the European Youth Programme agencies and the EuroMed Youth Units (EMYUs). Furthermore, they proposed creating a think tank comprised of said agencies and units, in order to come up with influential strategies and measures for cooperation among youth on both the northern and the southern and eastern shores of the Mediterranean. They also discussed the importance and role of the Programme in their respective countries, as well as future projects and initiatives.

In August, after the controversy raised by the caricatures of the Islamic Prophet Mohammed, the Danish government hosted a cultural festival, “Images

of the Middle East,” in several Danish cities to restore the image of Denmark in the Arab world. Denmark took the initiative of organising the Images of the Middle East Festival to foster mutual understanding, part of which was a conference convening Islamic religious leaders and Danish specialists to engage in religious and cultural dialogue.

In September of 2006, the Anna Lindh Euro-Mediterranean Foundation for the Dialogue of Cultures hosted the awards ceremony for the EuroMed Journalist Award for Cultural Diversity in Alexandria, Egypt. The laureates were four young journalists from Egypt, Italy, Belgium and Israel, respectively, who were chosen for their articles on other societies.

In October, the Dialogue 21 Workshop was also held in Alexandria, with the participation of 40 young people ranging in age from 18 to 25 and from 28 different Euro-Mediterranean countries, who came together to engage in dialogue on mutual respect in the Euro-Mediterranean region.

The UNESCO also organised the Euro-Mediterranean Youth Forum in Cyprus (16th-20th November), where a hundred or so young people from 50 different countries met to foster understanding and express themselves, participate in workshops and plenary sessions on peace and intercultural and interreligious dialogue in the Euro-Mediterranean Region, draw up recommendations for action on a regional level and make proposals to be addressed at the 2007 Youth Forum during UNESCO’s 34th General Conference.

The Importance of Intercultural Dialogue for Young People

The fact that the EuroMed Journalist Award for Cultural Diversity was awarded to young people from different Euro-Mediterranean countries contributes to fostering the image of culturally diversified societies and

consequently causing rapprochement between different communities. The young people who participate in such activities to promote intercultural dialogue can share their experiences with fellow citizens. An Egyptian, Italian, Belgian and Israeli meeting and engaging in dialogue helps to change certain preconceptions. Direct, individual dialogue with people from other cultures is just as important for young people as their general role in cross-cultural dialogue. This type of intercultural conversation helps youth with lower levels of education or who have never had the opportunity of meeting people of other nationalities to realise the importance of getting to know the 'Other', even if they consider them their enemies. Cultural events or meetings on cultural diversity allow participants to learn about others' viewpoints and at times gain a greater understanding of a society considered an enemy, possibly contributing to eventually transforming the word 'enemy' into 'friend' and arriving at reconciliation. Furthermore, the organisation of trips such as those offered to the four journalists as part of their award incites young people to discover other

communities and compare cultures in person. Like the EuroMed 2006 Meeting, the Dialogue 21 Workshop also provided the opportunity to exchange knowledge and ideas. There, youth were invited to put forth their proposals for overcoming the current crisis in North-South relations. The participants from different countries felt free to ask one another questions. They also formed groups to participate in a game on knowledge of other cultures. In addition, the Anna Lindh Foundation allowed each young person to ask questions of someone from a country on the opposite Mediterranean shore. All questions and answers were to be published and the proposals presented to the 35 governments of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership.

Increased Tension between the West and Muslim Communities

Although the Danish festival was not well received by the Muslim world, at least it transmitted the intention

MEDITERRANEAN FORUM OF THE YOUNG ALLIANCE OF CIVILISATIONS AND THE EURO-MEDITERRANEAN PARTNERSHIP

The Second Euromed Youth Meeting of the Anna Lindh Foundation was held in Barcelona from October 19-21, 2006. Jointly organized by the European Institute of the Mediterranean (IEMed), the Anna Lindh Euro-Mediterranean Foundation for the Dialogue Between Cultures, the United Nations Association of Spain, and the Mediterranean Study and Research Group, GERM (Groupement d'études et de recherches sur la Méditerranée), the meeting was designed to promote the active participation of young people from the Euro-Mediterranean region in the United Nations' new initiative, the Alliance of Civilizations.

Similar in many ways to the initiative that the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership decided to set up solely devoted to the promotion of dialogue between cultures, the Alliance of Civilizations is an initiative of the United Nations and seeks to mobilise concerted action by national institutions and members of civil society to eradicate prejudices and stereotypes. To lay the ground for this initiative, the Secretary General of the United Nations entrusted a High-Level Group with drawing up a strategy and establishing a series of priority actions. The resulting report was delivered to Mr. Kofi Annan on November 13, 2006, less than a month after the Euromed Youth Meeting.

To harmonise efforts with the international agenda, the organisers decided to focus this second meeting on the links between the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership and the Alliance of Civilizations by calling on young people in particular to make specific proposals for an action plan for this alliance. Young people from the Euro-Mediterranean region were invited by national networks of the Anna Lindh Foundation and similar platforms to present their applications to participate in the Euromed Youth Meeting and a careful selection process was initiated.

The meeting, held in Barcelona and inaugurated by the Deputy Director of the Alliance of Civilizations Secretariat, Mr. Shamil Idriss, brought together 100 young people between the ages of 18 and 30 from 35

different countries in the Euro-Mediterranean region. Drawing on their everyday, personal experiences with dialogue, conflict, understanding and misunderstanding, these young people worked together for three days on six key topics related to the Alliance of Civilizations, namely immigration, youth, education, gender, institutional politics and media. Divided into working groups, they had the opportunity to exchange and debate experiences and opinions and draw up a series of recommendations for the Alliance of Civilization's High-Level Group.

The recommendations were included in a final declaration that was delivered personally to the representative of the Co-Chair of the Alliance of Civilizations, Mr. Federico Mayor Zaragoza, and to the Executive Director of the Anna Lindh Foundation, Mr. Traugott Schoefthaler, during the closing ceremony. These institutions were also entrusted with taking these proposals on board in drawing up their action plans.

By dealing with a theme that is highly relevant and at the centre of international concerns, the meeting provided young people from the Euro-Mediterranean region with the opportunity to contribute directly to a United Nations initiative and reassert their wish to actively participate in the creation of genuine regional and global stability.

The Euromed Youth Meetings are instruments used by the Anna Lindh Foundation to promote knowledge, dialogue, harmony and understanding among young people from both sides of the Mediterranean.

Final Declaration:

www.euromedalex.org/En/Declaration%20of%20Principles.doc

Manal Tabet, Anna Lindh Foundation
Josep Robles, IEMed

of Copenhagen to restore friendly relations with Muslims. The Euro-Mediterranean community is divided on the crisis of the caricatures offensive to Islam and its Prophet. Some believe that liberty of expression has no limits, even when religion is involved, whereas others feel it is imperative to respect religion, above all since Islam is singled out by the Western World. The Danish Government made efforts to palliate the crisis by apologising but this was unfortunately insufficient due to the indifference displayed by young Danes, who did not realise the importance of containing such a situation in order to prevent commotion from lodging itself between the two shores of the Mediterranean and preserve its image as an intermediary zone.

The foundations concerned with youth of the Mediterranean Basin should continue to play the role of catalyst for cooperation among young people from both the North and the South and East. They should also continue to participate in the dialogue between governments and civil society youth organisations. A common language must be devised to bring differences to light and not just express the common values shared by both shores. Understanding and respecting differences is more important than delving into shared aspects, as it contributes to establishing a climate of respect and rapprochement. Good organisation of youth events is essential and success can be ensured, for instance, by allowing everyone to have a say and expanding spoken participation without giving preference to any one nationality.

The Role of Youth

It remains to be seen how young people can really help to strengthen dialogue among cultures (on the condition, of course, that they believe in its effectiveness). In the face of the hostility prevailing in the world and the clashes between Muslims and the West, in addition to terrorism, from which no country is safe today, dialogue among youth has become the best means of overcoming this crisis. Young people today are more extraverted than their forbears and could succeed where their governments have failed. To be successful, any dialogue among young people must abide by certain criteria, without which it would be better to save the time and money spent on organising such events:

- A sense of superiority should not tinge discussions.

- A young person should not discuss a subject with someone from another culture if he or she is not in a position to do so or is not ready to answer questions or listen to criticism. For instance, a Muslim who does not know her or his religion well should not take part in an interreligious dialogue, knowing that he or she could confuse others and convey false images and ideas.

- Participants must not line up against opinions but rather accept all ideas, even if they disagree with them. The most important thing is to understand others and open ourselves to other societies.

- People must not enter into dialogue with the idea of convincing others, but rather to ascertain their opinions. *"No civilization by itself can claim to represent all humanity or to assume full responsibility for it; nor can a single civilization claim exclusive rights to provide an ultimate and universally valid vision of how to be a human being and how to live wisely in today's world."* (Valdas Adamkus, President of the Republic of Lithuania).

With regard to intercultural dialogue, there is still a great deal of cultural shock and gaps existing between cultures and societies. Words and slogans are constantly being uttered by policymakers and leaders only to serve their interests without making the least effort to establish conditions for rapprochement among humanity. It is through meetings with young people from the Mediterranean Basin that we can overcome these obstacles of ignorance and misunderstanding, as well as gain an understanding and learn about the religions, thoughts, viewpoints and traditions of others. It is important to hold meetings between young Palestinians and Israelis, Israelis and Arabs, Syrians and Lebanese, non-Muslim Danes and Muslims, and Jews, Muslims and Christians, with the presence of other young people from Europe and Mediterranean countries to express their opinions objectively and impartially in a relaxed atmosphere free from tension. These young people can be the agents in a process of reconciliation via intercultural dialogue.

Through the consolidation of cooperation and friendship among young people from both shores of the Mediterranean, a new form of rapprochement will doubtless emerge among future generations. Youth represents a force for peace capable of fostering a culture of non-aggression, human rights education, civic behaviour, gender equality, the struggle against discrimination and xenophobia, intergenerational dialogue and the universal values of dialogue.