

Moving from reaction to prevention of armed conflict

Hundreds of civil society activists from all over the world congregate in New York to find ways to create a peaceful world

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Editor's Note: This is the introduction to a four-part series on the Global Partnership for the Prevention of Armed Conflict conference that took place in the UN headquarters in New York. The series will focus on the Arab Partnership for Conflict Prevention and Human Security and its members. Three interviews with members of the partnership will follow.

NEW YORK, United States: "Creating a peaceful world is a fuzzy dream of a utopian idealist. We are here over the next three days to do just that." With those words, Jody Williams, founding coordinator of the International Campaign to Ban Landmines (ICBL), announced the culmination of three years of hard work by the Global Partnership for the Prevention of Armed Conflict (GPPAC): a conference gathering delegations of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), civil society organizations (CSOs) and government representatives at the United Nations headquarters in New York to discuss conflict prevention.

"We must demystify the concept that violence is part of human nature. It is a choice," added Williams, the tenth woman in history to receive a Nobel Prize.

In this spirit, hundreds of civil society activists from 15 regions - many of whom had to leave behind homes devastated by war and conflict - heeded the call issued by UN Secretary General Kofi Annan in July 2001 to address the ever-increasing problem of conflict and ways to move from reaction to actual prevention.

To the sounds of Taiko - Japanese drums - GPPAC kicked off in the presence of prominent figures from across the globe who have spent their lives working to enhance civil society's role in creating and maintaining peace.

The conference was organized by Paul van Tongeren, head of the European Conference on Conflict Prevention (ECCP), with the collaboration of the UN.

"This is the first ever gathering held in the UN on this topic," said van Tongeren. "And there is still so much work to be done."

One of the most notable coalitions present at the conference was a united Arab delegation: the Arab Partnership for Conflict Prevention and Human Security (APCPHS).

In a globally strategic region in which numerous states, religions, sects and ethnic minorities often battle for existence - spurred on or tempered by outside influence - forming an alliance to work toward conflict prevention is, to say the least, a challenge.

Yet despite the damage brought by renewed clashes between Israel and Palestine, the war in Iraq, and the bombings in Egypt and Lebanon, the Middle East is witnessing a tremendous surge forward in terms of regime-change, free electoral processes and the empowerment of women in the political sector.

So with much optimism in the face of substantial challenges, a delegation was formed to head to New York to represent the Middle East and present an action agenda delineating goals and recommendations for governments, civil society organizations, media outlets and the United Nations to adopt.

Headed by Samuel Rizk - the founding member and executive director of the Beirut-based NGO Forum for Development, Culture and Dialogue - the delegation included activists from Lebanon, Palestine, Iraq, Jordan, Sudan, Egypt, Syria and Algeria.

The formation of an Arab coalition fills a serious vacuum in the Arab world, which sorely needs a network of people prepared to remind governments of their responsibilities to collaborate with citizens in order to prevent conflict.

"As civil society organizations from the Arab world, we look forward to the day when the term 'conflict prevention' will no longer be considered an 'oxymoron,'" said Rizk during the opening session.

"We cannot and will not work alone, and insist on a partnership between all the concerned stakeholders, so that one day, achieving just peace through peaceful means will be a realistic, reachable and legitimate aspiration for ordinary citizens as well as political leaders," he added.

At a time of contention about democracy in the Middle East and the impact of the coalition's war against terror, the APCPHS organized a panel discussion during which heated debates emerged regarding the Arab world and its numerous conflicts.

Sami Rasouli, a member of the Iraqi Human Rights Watch, said: "It is now imperative that the Muslim Peacemakers work together to counter stereotypes targeting the Muslim community after the September 11, 2001 attacks."

Hussein Shaaban, of the Iraqi Network for Human Rights, told the panel that there are no fewer than six types of conflicts in the Middle East: the Arab/Israeli conflict, the coalition's war in Iraq, territorial conflict between Iran and Iraq, the Arab/Arab conflict

between Iraq and Kuwait, border conflicts between Egypt and Sudan and internal struggles such as in Darfur, Sudan.

The 2004 Arab Human Development Report also expressed concern about low levels of women's empowerment, education and transparency in the Arab world.

Dr. Aza Karam of the UNDP said: "The different conflicts retard the progress of reform which we are desperately trying to achieve." Oppressive regimes use conflict as an excuse to "postpone the implementation of freedom" in favor of other ideologies.

Following the panel, the members of the Arab partnership held a session where each discussed examples of successful conflict resolution in their countries.

The Arab partnership also developed its own action agenda to be presented to the UN secretary general along with the global action agenda.

According to APCPHS' agenda, the partnership aims to "empower and enable CSOs working in the fields of conflict prevention and human security to contain current conflicts and prevent potential conflicts through knowledge-sharing and the development and implementation of innovative conflict prevention approaches."

The agenda also emphasizes the need for governments "to jointly develop and implement early warning systems with CSOs, and most importantly, to demonstrate the repercussions of right-to-peace violations."

But after three intense days covering a very broad range of topics, the momentum that had managed to unite the many delegations seemed to fizzle out.

The closing session, despite serving to highlight the significance of grouping so many NGOs and CSOs from all over the world, fell short of providing the sort of concrete resolutions needed to capture the world's attention.

The broad resolutions and pledges did not include feasible, on-the-ground measures that governments could take to support CSOs.

They also left members without a clear idea of how to proceed in the future. One woman at the closing session said: "I don't really know where to start when I leave here - the where and the how."

Yet clearly, action is required.

As the founder and executive director of the African Center for the Constructive Resolution of Disputes, Vasu Gounden, said in the closing session: "This dream is the power of an idea and is driven by the people. Our day has arrived. We cannot afford to pick up the debris after the bomb has exploded."

He added: "While we have dined on New York's finest foods, millions of children have died. In the next 10 minutes 2,800 children in Africa would have died of malaria yet we squander our time and resources fighting each other."

Gounden, who has worked with former South African President Nelson Mandela in Burundi, added: "Poverty has a name, a face, a mother, a father, a brother and a sister. Will we turn words into deeds? Let us not wait until the bomb explodes, my friends, let us act now."