

Informal Interactive Hearings of the General Assembly
June 23-24, 2005
'Freedom from Fear' Cluster

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Mr. President, Mr. Moderator, your Excellencies, fellow colleagues,

As we have been invited to these informal hearings, I think that it is appropriate for me to share a testimony – a testimony from the Middle East.

In the context of this global civil society family, and as a good husband, I asked my wife, in her professional capacity, of course, as a journalist in a newspaper in Lebanon on some priorities that she sees for these particular hearings on 'Freedom from Fear'. She immediately said 'to get the UN to train security forces in the country to better protect the people!' I thought that she may have misunderstood the question or the purpose of these hearings, but then again, it was her colleague in the newspaper who was assassinated by a car bomb three weeks ago!

In a newspaper article covering events in Egypt recently, a demonstrator says, "we won't be hostages to fear and we're not staying home". I imagine the nearly one million demonstrators in the streets of Beirut on March 14, one month after the bombing that killed former Lebanese Prime Minister Harriri and 20 others, were saying just the same.

While we often blame governments for being so 'detached' from the genuine concerns of their citizens, lately, I have been getting the sense that sometimes even civil society organizations can lose touch with reality – the reality of fear that people endure when they dare to speak up against the powers-that-be, against the status quo, and against the injustice that they see and feel as ordinary citizens. What relevance do our 'activities' and 'events' have if ordinary, moderate citizens are being killed around us?

And, these are among the more stable countries in the region; need I say more about Iraq, Palestine, and Sudan? I am sure you understand quite well.

Fear, at this point, is all around.

We're fearful of not living long enough to see our future and that of our children.

But, we are also fearful, now, of living to see a future that has in store more violence, hatred, more hardship, more heartbreak, and even more frustration.

It is only recently, and because of these feelings, that I now understand what it means to 'live in fear'. Many of us now know what it means for an entire community and nation to be 'crippled' by fear – to be 'taken hostage' by the sense of helplessness in the face of lack of hope for the future.

But in the midst of all this, some light can be found at the end of the tunnel. Perhaps these very hearings, within the context of the UN are that very light.

Encouraged by the Global Partnership for the Prevention of Armed Conflict, a group of conflict resolution and human security organizations in the Arab World (a handful, I might add) came together in February of this year and formed what is now called the Arab Partnership for Conflict Prevention and Human Security APCPHS. In only four months, we were actually able to draft a Regional Action Agenda to be presented to at the GPPAC Conference in July. Naturally we are very excited about the speed by which this was done (even by Arab standards)! Together we formulated a set of 11 principles upon which our Partnership would be based, among them are

- Reaching just peace through peaceful means
- Promoting 'the' Arab culture of peace
- and, opening channels of cooperation's between CSOs, governments, regional inter-governmental organizations, and different UN bodies

It is within the context of this last principle - opening channels of cooperation - that these hearings are valuable for us as civil society organizations.

Mr. President, with the convening of these historic hearings, all of the stakeholders responsible for the prevention of violent conflict, for the elimination of fear, and for bringing about a genuine, grassroots-based culture of peace have effectively been engaged: I mean the governments, the regional inter-governmental organizations, the international organizations, the private sector, and now, civil society actors. We appeal to the UN, specifically to the GA, to continue to encourage governments to find and create space for interaction with civil society in the regions and nationally. Furthermore, and more importantly, the UN, through these hearings, has provided a opportunity for the direct interaction between governments and CSOs in NY, so we further appeal to the UN to 'convene' and provide this 'space' at the regional and national levels – specifically in the area of prevention of armed, violent conflict.

This can be done by providing mechanisms in the UN regional and national offices that bring together the different stakeholders, before, during and after the conflict erupts. Within the context of the Draft Outcome Document, and the recommendations on the different mechanisms of the Peacebuilding Commission (Paragraph 40), this might be possible as part of the tasks allotted to the Peacebuilding Support Office, only if it were 1) to have a role in pre-conflict with the different stakeholders, and 2) to have appropriate liaison and program officers in regional and national UN offices.

The Arab Partnership for Conflict Prevention and Human Security is committed to this end: to reach out to all relevant stakeholders, with the knowledge that only cooperation between these stakeholders can effectively bring about peace in communities plagued by violent conflicts, but more importantly, to prevent and safeguard against the rise of violent conflict in the future. This, I believe, is the shift from ‘reaction’ to ‘prevention’.

This UN role – as a convener and provider of safe space merits specific and clear mention in the Draft Outcome Document, in the section on Peace and Collective Security, rather than merely adding a welcomed, yet insufficient, clause in paragraph 102. The role of civil society in peace building perhaps deserves more than a ‘disclaimer’ at the end of the document.

In closing, Mr. President, many of us in the Middle East – and, I imagine, many of the people in this room – are tired of going to funerals, literally and figuratively, to bury friends or even courageous strangers, but also to bury budding ideas, and ultimately to bury hope. I believe that with these hearings we can come to a new understanding of cooperation between civil society, governments, and the UN to prevent the rise of violent conflict.

Thank you.