

United Nations, Department of Public Information, NGO Relations, S-1070 J-L

Tel: (917) 367-9380 ,or (212) 963-7709 *
Fax: (212) 963-6914 * E-mail:section1d@un.org

DPI/NGO Briefing

“Sustainable Peace through Reconciliation”

5 February 2009

Summary

Maria Luisa Chavez, Chief of the NGO Relations Cluster, began by acknowledging that the briefing had been organized in honour of the year of 2009 being designated as the International Year of Reconciliation by the United Nations General Assembly on 23 January 2007. Ms. Chavez stated that throughout history almost all civilization have faced some sort of dividing and devastating conflict. She quoted the General Assembly Resolution on Reconciliation, explaining that it was adopted, “Recognizing that reconciliation processes are particularly necessary and urgent in countries and regions of the world which had suffered or are suffering, situations of conflict that had affected and divided societies in their various internal, national and international facets” (A/61/L.22), and thus proclaimed 2009 the International Year of Reconciliation. She explained that the resolution encouraged both governments and organizations to encourage the reconciliation process through a number of social, cultural and educational programs. She concluded by stating that the process of reconciliation was essential to understand and confront our differences in order to move forward as a unified and peaceful society.

Her Excellency Ambassador María Rubiales de Chamorro, Permanent Representative of Nicaragua to the United Nations, began by briefly explaining the history behind the Resolution’s proposal. Nicaragua’s motivation to propose the International Year of Reconciliation began with some NGOs in Nicaragua, which believed Nicaragua’s experiences could be used help in other parts of the world to understand the need for internal and external reconciliation, after the end of the war in the 1980s. When Nicaragua proposed the first draft of the resolution, it was sponsored not only by Latin American countries, but also countries outside the region such as the Philippines, Mauritius and Rwanda. She noted that after an

intense negotiation process the version of the Resolution approved by the General Assembly was missing much of what had originally been proposed by Nicaragua, as some countries –in particular the United States and the European Union – did not want the a proposal for the Year of Reconciliation. She stressed the importance of the reconciliation process to bring about peace, and that peace is the core of the United Nations Charter, and thus she and the other co-sponsors could not understand the reluctance to accept such an important proposal. She argued that there were two aspects of the initial resolution that had been excluded. Firstly, there was no follow up to the Resolution allowed. Reconciliation, she asserted, could not be done in the abstract, there must be involvement from both the country involved in the conflict as well as from the United Nations. Secondly, there was no definition as to the role of the media, which she wanted to ensure would be used as tool for the advancement of reconciliation, rather than a tool to promote conflict in order to sell newspapers. Her Excellency then looked at modern history of Latin America, emphasizing that countries in the region have made great steps toward reconciliation and integration. Starting in the 1950s, many Latin America and Caribbean countries were controlled by military dictatorships, which controlled their states politically, economically, socially, and militarily, while provoking conflict situations. She argued that these leaders were also friends to the United States government, and were therefore used as a means of keeping the region under control. However, at the beginning of the 1960s, peoples in many of these countries started attempting to beak away from their authoritarian governments, starting with the revolution in Cuban and in other Central American nations, eventually leading to the overthrow of the majority of military dictatorships in the region by the mid-1980s. Ambassador de Chamorro then turned to the particular case of Nicaragua. The 1990s provided the first opportunity for Nicaragua reconcile internally. A literary campaign was started, which reduced the country's illiteracy from 40% to 12%, but really to gain a greater understanding of their identity after years of social disconnection caused by numerous European colonizers. As an example of external reconciliation process, she pointed to the 2007 maritime dispute between Nicaragua and Honduras, which almost led to war. The two Presidents took the matter to the International Court of Justice, and the day of the decision both Presidents met at their border and decided to comply with the decision no matter what the outcome. Today, the countries are completely reconciled and at peace. Nicaragua was moving forward with reconciliation and this was the only way to sustainable development.

Felicitas Hoffmann, currently a **judge** at the District Court of Düsseldorf, Germany, began by referring to this year's theme of reconciliation. She stated that the proclamation of an International Year of Reconciliation was historical. She argued that it marked a new direction in diplomacy upon which global peacekeeping efforts will be pursued. Additionally, she explained that it drew our attention to indigenous cultural reconciliation rights, which have effectively been used for hundreds of years to overcome conflict all over the world. First, she defined the meaning of reconciliation as denoting both the target and the process leading up to that target. She then examined the corresponding word for reconciliation in other languages and cultures, which often reflect their old rituals. **Judge Hoffmann** focused on the Hawaiian tradition of reconciliation. In Hawaiian, the literal

definition of Ho'oponopono is 'setting things right', and was a process which began with the subject of the conflict being taken before the community and a respected community leader, who acts as a sort of mediator, will ask for absolute truth and humility. The process, she described, requires the one party to voice their grievances to the afflicting party, and a chance for either side to make sincere confessions of their wrongdoings. After this process the community leader can decide the resolution to the conflict. **Judge** Hoffman also depicts that reconciliation lies highly beyond rationality and demands absolute truth, authenticity and another state of consciousness. She quoted former Secretary General, Kofi Annan's words, "Reconciliation is the highest form of dialogue", emphasizing its significance in mobilizing democratic processes. Democracies characterized by high principles such as human dignity, equity, and freedom of speech, and are also characterized by structures that facilitate participation. These principles are clearly present in the indigenous reconciliation processes, which require rebuilding of relationships to be applied not only in post-conflict societies but also in other issues. She stressed that the goal for the Year of Reconciliation should be to mobilize democratic processes in various areas by reconciliatory dialogues, such as monthly activities, creative work, films and sports. She strongly highlighted the importance and the need to prolong the observation of reconciliation by a Reconciliation decade from 2010 to 2020. She lastly noted that it would be a long term process and requires an enclosure of all parts of the society during this period and an implementation in all fields, characterizing a specific society.

Jaqueline Murekatete, Human Rights Activist with Miracle Corner and survivor of the 1994 Tutsi Genocide in Rwanda, began with a brief history of what took place in Rwanda in 1994. The 1994 genocide claimed the lives of not only an estimated one million men, women, and children, but was an event that destroyed the entire social fabric of Rwandan society. The majority of the killings were performed by civilians, who killed their Tutsi neighbours and friends. Thus these relationships had to be completely reconstructed because the genocide destroyed their social significance. Ms. Murekatete also pointed out that since there was such a large number of civilian participants in the genocide, today most of the survivors must live and interact on a daily basis with those who were directly involved in murdering their families. She argued that what happened in 1994 was a result of many years of indoctrination and encouragement of hate by the government and that the dehumanization for Tutsis was part of the educational system. Despite the efforts of the new government and of civil society, the ideology of genocide and hate still exists in the minds of the people. Given Rwanda's history and the continued intolerance, she asserted, the reconciliation process would be a long one. However, in many ways the country has come a long way since 1994, and reconciliation is now a part of government policy. Ms. Murekatete pointed to the fact that the government no longer used the identification categories of Hutu or Tutsi, but simply Rwandan, as an example of one way in which the government was trying to promote a larger Rwandan identity. She considered community initiatives between the perpetrators and victims essential for the country's future. She noted several areas critical to reconciliation in Rwanda: the first was education, stressing the need for reeducation on how to live together. Second was development, noting the connection between lack of

development and conflict as well as the fact that this was an area where individuals NGOs can create positive change in the country. Third was healing, because Rwanda still had a traumatized society for both survivors and perpetrators, and that it would be an ongoing process that may take generations to be fully realized. She stated that these areas would be the necessary tools to help the country rebuild. She ended her presentation with a video of a community center in provincial Rwanda, being built by Hutus and Tutsis, as an example of how working together can bring great benefits to their struggling community.

Claudia Abate, creator and president of Foundation for Post Conflict Development (FPCD), began by commending Nicaragua's efforts to bring the Resolution for an International Year of Reconciliation to the General Assembly. She noted that there are many examples of reconciliation around the world especially in post conflict or developing countries. She asserted that the FPCD makes no judgment of conflicts or the manner in which they are resolved. The FPCD remains neutral in order to fulfill the Millennium Development Goals. Since gaining their independence in 2002, Timor-Leste's reconciliation process has occurred with many actors and at many levels. Ms. Abate affirmed that she would discuss the practical accomplishments of the FPCD to create sustainable peace through Reconciliation in Timor-Leste. The FPCD focused on two themes: 'No Experience Necessary' and 'Spontaneous Reconciliation'. When the FPCD was entrusted by the Monaco Red Cross to create the first maternity clinic in Timor-Leste, none of the participants had ever built one. Yet, this project is exemplary of their commitment to creating sustainable peace by attacking the roots of poverty through improving healthcare facilities and reducing infant and maternal mortalities. The success of this "landmark project" and its ability to provide jobs to the community has led to further social investment and unification in the project. This model is to be applied to all the 64 health centers that have been proposed. Abate insisted that these types community based projects are highly needed to achieve reconciliation with "no experience necessary." Peace through reconciliation can also occur "spontaneously" through community based programs which provide alternatives to gang membership. Another example is *Reforestation and Family Income project*, where trees were planted and kitchen gardens created to ensure not only nutritional intake but jobs and income for products are sold for the community. Abate acknowledged that "spontaneous reconciliation will not be applicable everywhere. However, engaging, empowering, and leading the communities to decide what is best for them in order to lift them up from poverty can yield powerful and spontaneous results." A new period of peace has emerged in Timor-Leste and she is very confident in the future of the nation. The FPCD will continue to aid Timor-Leste and promote peace through reconciliation. She closed by endorsing **Judge** Hoffman's call on a decade of reconciliation from 2010 to 2020 and giving special thanks to the audience for their attention.

During the question and answer period, Cora Weiss, a prominent figure in the NGO community, addressed to the Ambassador of Nicaragua asking if the Ambassador would consider re-entering in the resolution to this year's UN General Assembly, with the important elements that were left out of the current Resolution on Reconciliation. The Ambassador declared that she

would indeed try to implement the key annotations that were missing in the resolution as well as working even harder for the cause. She proclaimed that in order for reconciliation to be a success, societies must unite. However, the challenging part is that societies as well as governments must wish to do so. Ms. Claudia Abate was directly asked about the future of her foundation, FPCD. She said she would always have a responsibility for Timor-Leste, but wished for her foundation to expand to other nations and noted that raising funds is essential for that sort of mobilization. A number of questions focused on the current situation of Rwanda and the possibility of reconciliation between Hutus and Tutsis. One questioner asked if any attempts to use the Hawaiian process of reconciliation, mentioned in **Judge Hoffmann's** presentation, could be used in Rwanda. Ms. Murekatete answered that this process was being implemented in Rwanda, in the form of village trials, because the government had no way of trying the large number of civilian perpetrators. This process, she added, was an opportunity for both the victim and the participants to reconcile and to help the community move forward together. Another questioner asked what the result of the United Nations' decision to repatriate Hutus from East Congo would be when they returned to Rwanda. Ms. Murekatete mentioned a article in a recent issue of *TIME* magazine about how Hutus who fled the country are training their children to hate the Tutsis and to eventually return to Rwanda to 'finish' the genocide. The fact that this kind of ideology still exists is a challenge for the government and Rwandan society, which the government is meeting with reeducation and readjustment programs for returning Rwandan Hutus. A similar question asked how nations can be forced to admit to their transgressions. Ambassador Chamorro stated that simply putting pressure on countries such as the five permanent members of the UN did not suffice. Nations must engage out of their own will. It is essential, she added, that people work together. **Judge Hoffman** was asked whether she believed that peace through reconciliation as possible between Israel and Palestine given the recent events in Gaza. She responded that the answer could be seen in the film of the Hand in Hand schools. The **Judge** also argued that reconciliation is possible if you wish it to be, and that in conflict the question is if either side wants reconciliation. Another questioner asked how to have a more powerful linkage with the United Nations and the member states, to make something of the International Year of Reconciliation. Ms. Chavez noted the ability of NGOs to mobilize in order to help the process along by demonstrating their voice. Ambassador de Chamorro emphasized the need for NGOs to communicate with member states, and **Judge Hoffmann** agreed that dialogue was most important. One question asked was how material resources have influenced the reconciliation process at the political level. Ambassador de Chamorro stated that in Nicaragua the conflict started many centuries ago as a geopolitical question, over the canal and trade routes connecting North and South America, which continues to be an issue today. Ms. Murekatete stated that the genocide was not based on material competition but rather government indoctrination of hate. However, today the government faced the issue of land distribution in the densely populated country. Finally, Ms. Murekatete was asked how much importance is put on who writes history, and who teaches it, as there are so many conflicts with deep historical roots. Ms. Murekatete answered that based on her personal experience, when she was young it was impossible to get an education in regard of the true history without a message of hatred against the Tutsis. However, now

as they have a mixed government the students are taught to understand themselves as Rwandans not as Hutus and Tutsis.

A representative from *Peace Action* urged the other attendees to draft and sign a **petition** for a resolution to the General Assembly to declare 2010-2020 the International Decade of Reconciliation [An announcement will be made as soon as the **petition** is up on the website of the DPI/NGO Executive Committee].

This Briefing was attended by over 170 representatives of NGOs, United Nations and Permanent Mission staff as well as interns from various Departments and NGOs

/end

Prepared by Gail B-T Sainté with assistance from Tatiana Alvarado, Jennifer Basch, and Heather Lee

9 February 2009.