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Eighteen international media seminar concludes with panels on harnessing new. Tools for positive change, mayors'role in contributing to middle east peace (Received from a UN Information Officer.)

LISBON, 23 July — The eighteenth International Media Seminar on Peace in the Middle East concluded this morning with two panel discussions, the first on “Harnessing new media for positive change in the Middle East”, and the second on “The Civil Society Initiative: The role of Israeli and Palestinian mayors in contributing to peace and security in the Middle East”.

Following the conclusion of the panels, the Seminar heard statements by Jorge Sampaio, High Representative of the Alliance of Civilizations and former President of Portugal; Kiyo Akasaka, United Nations Under-Secretary-General for Communications and Public Information; and Carlos Neves Ferreira, President of the Portuguese Government’s Diplomatic Institute.

Mr. Sampaio said that, while political problems must be solved by political means, some protracted ones, even when settled by a binding agreement between political actors or Governments, must be embedded in a much broader process involving people at all levels of society. Therefore, peacemaking was a process, a way of living together, and, in that sense, never made but always in the making. The media could play a critical role in rebuilding individual and collective relations, helping to shape a greater sense of commonality by developing a sense of future based on what each side needed or desired, and by focusing on hope for the future.

Mr. Akasaka said the media were a major partner for all initiatives by the international community, particularly the United Nations, in fostering understanding and addressing the challenging problems of ignorance and fear. However, challenges remained, not least because the role of new media was evolving in both positive and negative ways, but that was a fact of life. More space and more opportunities must be created for women to participate in and lead change, he said, expressing hope that the optimism expressed during the Seminar would be substantiated, and that the Seminar had helped contribute to a conducive, positive environment for future talks.

Mr. Neves Ferreira said it was his country’s second time to host the Seminar, which had been on the United Nations agenda for quite some time. The Institute, in line with the Government’s global external policy, was based on support for multilateralism, he said, adding that there was

no better organization than the United Nations to accommodate the importance that Portugal attached to multilateral relations.

In the first panel, speakers emphasized that today's communication opportunities made it easier to bring people together, to consult and to work together. Digital media made it easier to gather information and obtain broader perspectives on and perceptions of conflict. New media offered new platforms for communication and for people to transcend political or geographical boundaries, although they could also enhance conflict by linking people with the same harmful views.

Martim Cabral, a Lisbon-based senior commentator and columnist, moderated the first panel, which heard a joint presentation by Ruth Eglash of the Jerusalem Post and Hani Hazaimah of the Jordan Times. The panellists were Sam Adelsberg, founder and CEO of LendforPeace.org; Asmaa Fathy of the El Mawqef Al Arabi newspaper; Ruzanna Tantushyan of the Invisible Bridges Multimedia Website; and J. J. Goldberg, Editorial Director of New York City-based newspaper The Forward.

During the second panel, participants discussed, among other issues, people-to-people contact as the way to break suspicions and doubts while moving forward to build and contribute to the peace process. One of the most important critical issues was the need for education based on the shared values of sustainable development and sustainable management of regional resources for the benefit of all communities. It was pointed out that, while the international public tended to think that the question of peace among Jews and Arabs was restricted to the national level — Israel and Syria or Israel and Lebanon, for example — it should be seen also at the local level, where mayoralities had a great impact.

Under-Secretary-General Akasaka moderated the second panel, which featured, as the keynote speaker, Ilan Juran, Chairman of the Israeli-Palestinian Civil Society Initiative, Executive Director of the New York University-Polytechnic Institute and Executive Director of W-SMART. The panellists were Benny Vaknin, Mayor of Ashkelon; Abdelmaseh Hani, Mayor of Beit Sahour; Joao Fidalgo, President of Empresa Portuguesa des Aguas Livres S.A and Vice-President of the W-SMART Association; and Haim Avitan, Mayor of Hadera.

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Ms. EGLASH of the Jerusalem Post and Mr. HAZAIMEH of the Jordan Times, in a joint presentation, noted that today's digital media made it possible to bring together journalists and groups of people who, even 10 years ago, would not have been able either to contact each other directly or remain in contact. New media also made it possible for Israeli and Arab journalists to contribute to each other's work across countries and beliefs, and to produce truly collaborative efforts, which, by providing broader perspectives, including those of the other side, could help reduce extremism. However, collaboration between Arab and Israeli journalists could give rise to racist and personal attacks against them. Media could play different roles in conflict situations, including as interpreter, mediator and facilitator of further conflict.

Mr. ADELSBERG of LendforPeace.org noted that many young people had only lived through

the Israeli-Palestinian conflict through new media, and they were quick to recognize their power. However, people continued to get their news from traditional sources, supplemented by other information from tools like Facebook, Twitter and blogs. To say that new media had been embraced by the entire younger generation was incorrect, he said, pointing out the disconnection between the dialogue that took place on social media sites and what was happening in the real world. Those online, including in the diaspora, were not necessarily representative of the views of regional or local populations, he cautioned, adding that the Internet offered new platforms for communication, including between Israelis and Palestinians, and for people to transcend political or geographical boundaries. At the same time, social media could also enhance conflict by linking together people with the same harmful views, he warned.

Ms. FATHY of El Mawqef Al Arabi said electronic media could be used as a means for rapprochement between cultures and civilisations, noting that her Hijabskirt.info project examined freedom of expression in the electronic age. It addressed stereotypes of Arab women in the Western world, including the question of veils, and provided an opportunity to address perceptions and expectations of women and, through them, of Islam and Muslims. The project could be used in the future to discuss political or religious conflicts, she said.

Ms. TANTUSHYAN of the Invisible Bridges Multimedia Website said that, in times of conflict and crisis, traditional media had turned to marginalized and excluded voices to find out the truth, and during such times, those voices were perhaps the most helpful in resolving and concluding conflicts. Today, new media and social networking sites were the means by which people got to know each other, helping to destroy the concept of “us and them”. If journalists wished to do their job responsibly, they needed to listen to those who had been marginalized, and social media could help in that effort, she pointed out. Traditional and new media were not mutually exclusive, she emphasized, noting that social networking tools could help journalists improve their reporting, and urging the younger generation to use their new media savvy to help resolve conflict.

Mr. GOLDBERG of The Forward said people read what they wanted to read and listened to what they wanted to hear. The Internet made that easier, promoting the fragmentation of communities that no longer had one common set of facts. Minority voices once properly and rightly suppressed had now become forces in world politics, he noted, adding that his publication tried to be a voice of moderation, presenting the views of Palestinians in favour of peace, for example, in order to show the Jewish community that there were partners on the other side. However, the newspaper was very unpopular and lacked a large following, although many people talked about it. Today, everyone had their own narrative and nobody had to listen to others, he said, noting that people wanted to reach over politics to connect with people directly. Ultimately, however, it was Governments that sent armies to war, he pointed out. Interactive Discussion.

In the ensuing discussion, speakers raised different issues, including how new media enabled people to confront and learn about different perspectives and attitudes, including hostile ones; whether journalists could publish private opinions in social media and still be perceived as fair and balanced journalists; and whether English was the best vehicle to further the dialogue between Israelis and Palestinians. Ms. TANTUSHYAN said journalists should be clear about

using social media in their work, pointing out that the use of such tools was still new and growing. Newsrooms should develop guidelines to make clear how journalists used social networking sites in their work.

Ms. EGLASH said that, while English provided access to the world through the Internet, in order to reach the people involved in the Middle East conflict, it was necessary to address them in their own languages, Hebrew and Arabic.

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Mr. AKASAKA noted that it was fitting to conclude the Seminar with a practical look at cooperation on the ground.

Mr. JURAN said the Civil Society Initiative represented cooperation between Israeli and Palestinian mayors who had decided to set aside their differences and work together for the sustainable development of their respective societies. The WasteWater project dealt with slush treatment and recycling, with the ultimate goal of achieving environmentally safe, clean and sustainable ecosystems in the region. That task could not be carried out without very close cooperation among all local communities that used the same ecosystem and water resources for their survival, he said. The initiative focused mainly on capacity-building, ecosystem awareness and local initiatives.

There was Israeli-Palestinian cooperation between city governments, but there were also a number of regional challenges, he said. One of the most critical issues was the need for education based on the shared values of sustainable development and the sustainable management of regional water resources for the benefit of all communities. Access to water was one of the most important Millennium Development Goals, and a vital one, it was universally agreed. The media could play a role in promoting awareness among policymakers and the public of the need to create a water culture and the acceptability of reusing water.

Panellists

Mayor VAKNIN of Ashkelon said that, while the Seminar had discussed all kinds of media, direct people-to-people contacts should not be forgotten, stressing that such connections must be forged in order for the two sides to talk. While national Governments must deal with regional, national and international issues, it was for local governments to solve the real everyday problems of their people. The cities of Ashkelon and Gaza were no strangers to the benefits of working together for the benefit of their respective communities, he said, noting that their joint construction of regional infrastructure was part of the way forward. People-to-people contacts were the way to break through suspicions and doubts and move forward, thereby building and contributing to the peace process, he said.

Mayor HANI of Beit Sahour, said municipalities could contribute to peace, as they faced daily challenges that could convince their respective societies of the right way forward. Water was a crucial issue for the region, and if the right to water was respected, the Palestinians would see the other side as a party that wanted peace. Waste-water issues were also important, as Palestinian areas lacked capacity to build water-treatment facilities since they lacked space and faced many obstacles. Unless such serious issues were dealt with at the political level, they would become obstacles to peace, he said, adding that if they could be dealt with, they could become indicators of the ability of both sides to create an environment conducive to peace.

Mr. FIDALGO of Empresa Portuguesa des Aguas Libres, S.A and the W-SMART Association said water management was under stress due to many changes in the globalized world. The trend affected water operators around the world in one way or another, and that was why experiences, best practices, information and knowledge gained must be shared alongside water-management infrastructure. The challenges of sustainable urban water supply and sanitation were particularly important, as there was a need for worldwide awareness and international resources to support local development. The Civil Society Initiative was vital in strategic partnerships for environmental peacemaking, and people needed to be brought together to protect the environment, water resources and the future, he stressed.

Mayor AVITAN of Hadera said the international public tended to think that peace among Jews and Arabs was something restricted to the national level — Israel and Syria or Israel and Lebanon, for example — but it should be seen also at the domestic level, where mayoralties had a great impact. Israelis and Arabs had different perspectives on the need for peace, and although there were radicals on both sides, the majority believed in peace in the context of living side by side in harmony and cooperation. Mayors could create an atmosphere of peace, as peace existed mainly through people. They could help create links, and receive and disseminate new ideas. Two States for two peoples would allow the coexistence that had been discussed for so long.

RIYAD MANSOUR, Permanent Observer of Palestine to the United Nations in New York, pointing out that water was one of the final-status issues, said the situation was unique, as Palestine was under the control of the occupying authorities and there was a limit to what the Palestinians could do. The issues raised by the mayors were part of that complex issue, he said, adding that there was a lot of abstraction and a lack of concrete ideas around the Civil Society Initiative. More thought was needed about how to approach the issue.

Concluding Remarks

Mr. SAMPAIO, High Representative of the Alliance of Civilisations, said it was rare to see an audience made up of representatives from the media and local authorities, a challenging but promising combination. Addressing the issue of advancing the Middle East Peace process from a civil society perspective was an essential dimension of the quest for sustainable peace, he said, adding that a people-to-people approach was a sine qua non condition for peace, complementary

to any political agreement. Political problems must be solved by political means, but some protracted political problems, even when settled by a binding agreement between political actors or Governments, must be embedded in a much broader process, involving people at all levels of society. Therefore, peacemaking was a process, a way of living together. It was never made but was always in the making.

He said that growing diversity — ethnic, linguistic, cultural and religious — posed new challenges for democracies in terms of rights, social cohesion, inclusion, equality of opportunities, participation and citizenship. Because of global communications, people lived in one world, where conflicts anywhere were conflicts everywhere, and where local divides tended to become global. Therefore, media literacy education in a broad sense had become a central issue of modern times. However, in most countries, policymakers shaping national education programmes had just recently, become aware of the need for media literacy. A truly democratic political system depended on the active participation of its citizens — active and, most importantly, informed citizens.

Media literacy was one of the principal new tools that provided citizens with the skills they needed to make sense of the sometimes overwhelming flow of information through new communication technologies. Those forces were reshaping traditional values while transforming them into contemporary new ways of understanding life, society, and culture. The media could play a critical role in rebuilding individual and collective relations, while helping to shape a greater sense of commonality by developing a sense of the future based on what each side needed or desired, and by focusing on hope for the future. The media could make a difference, he stressed.

Mr. AKASAKA, United Nations Under-Secretary-General for Communications and Public Information, said there had been a very rich dialogue during the Seminar, and many ideas and initiatives had been exchanged. The United Nations always asked journalists to write about the Seminar and to tell the world about the exchanges between Israeli and Palestinian journalists, which had been taking place for years. There had been some difficult moments due to political realities, but the Seminar had proved yet again that there was a forum in which honest views and challenges, as well as problems, could be exchanged. The media were major partners for all initiatives by the international community, particularly the United Nations, in fostering understanding and addressing the challenging problems of ignorance and fear.

He said the Seminar was the first to address the role of new media, which showed that the time had come for the international community to address the increasingly important role they played, and to make the best use of them to promote dialogue and increase understanding among Member States, stakeholders and partners in such difficult areas as peace in the Middle East. Challenges remained, however, not least because the role of new media was evolving in both positive and negative ways, but that was a fact of life. New media were increasingly important for young people in particular, he said, noting that the Seminar had also discussed women's

contributions to peace. More space and opportunities must be created for women to participate in and lead change, he stressed, expressing hope that the optimism expressed about the peace process would be substantiated, and that the Seminar had contributed, through the connections made by the participants, to a conducive, positive environment for peace talks.

Mr. NEVES FERREIRA, President of the Portuguese Government's Diplomatic Institute, said the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Diplomatic Institute had hosted the Seminar with utmost pleasure and commitment. The Seminar had been on the United Nations agenda for quite some time, and this was the second time Portugal had hosted it. The Ministry and the Institute had wanted to contribute because Portugal pursued a global external policy based on support for multilateralism, and there was no better organization than the United Nations to accommodate the importance that Portugal attached to multilateral relations.

Seminar Round-Up

Opening the Seminar on 22 July, Pedro Manuel Lourtie, Secretary of State for European Affairs of Portugal, said the media could be very efficient in the ways in which it influenced perceptions of conflict. The Middle East conflict had lasted for many years, but instead of talking about the past, the issues that should be considered should include the present and the future, as well as the issue of rights, such as the right of the Palestinian people to their own land and security. There should be a feasible solution that could be implemented within the next 24 months, entailing two-States living side by side in peace and security.

In a welcoming statement, Kiyoo Akasaka, Under-Secretary-General for Communications and Public Information, said the Seminar's objective was not only to sensitize public opinion to the question of Palestine, but also to foster dialogue and understanding between Palestinians and Israelis as a contribution to the creation of an environment conducive to peace.

He also read out a message from United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, which noted that the Seminar was taking place just as Israeli-Palestinian proximity talks got under way. The coming weeks would be critical in determining whether there could be a move to direct negotiations. A two-State solution was the consensus position of the international community, as well as Israelis and Palestinians, he said, emphasizing that it was essential for Israel to maintain its democratic character and identity, in order to gain security and legitimacy throughout the region, and for the Palestinians to achieve genuine freedom, national self-determination and an end to the occupation.

The Seminar also heard a keynote address delivered on behalf of Robert H. Serry, United Nations Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process and the Secretary-General's Personal Representative to the Palestine Liberation Organization and the Palestinian National Authority. Delivered by Richard Miron, Spokesperson for the Special Coordinator, it stressed the crucial role that the media could play in influencing opinion in favour of peace. The situation on

the ground did not allow for complacency, he emphasized, warning that tensions in Jerusalem, or an outbreak of violence, could threaten progress and derail the talks.