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PANELS FOCUS ON NEW VERSUS TRADITIONAL TOOLS, ROLE OF WOMEN AS EIGHTEENTH

INTERNATIONAL MEDIA SEMINAR ON PEACE IN THE MIDDLE EAST CONTINUES

(Received from a UN Information Officer.)

LISBON, 22 July — The eighteenth International Media Seminar on Peace in the Middle East continued this afternoon, holding two panel discussions on the topics "New media vs. traditional media: allies or adversaries in furthering the peace process" and "The role of Israeli and Palestinian women in achieving peace and security in the Middle East".

Participants in the first panel raised the point that the information revolution was creating new opportunities and realities, offering access with little or no filter to information and opinion. Such advances had in the past led to great political, social and other changes. New media not available only a few years ago offered endless opportunities to meet and forge links with new people. However, it was important to distinguish the difference between blogging and other forms of new media, and the established media, as the former seemed to erode certain simple principles upon which journalism rested, particularly the need for verification and supporting information. Blogs often lacked that standard.

Moderated by Antonio Pedro Monteiro Lima, Permanent Representative of Cape Verde to the United Nations and Chairman of the Committee on Information, the panel featured Edmund Ghareeb, Expert in Arab and American Media and their Coverage of Middle East Affairs at American University in Washington, D.C., as the keynote speaker. The panellists were Antonio Granado, Professor at the Universidade Nova de Lisboa; Nacer Al-Laham, Editor-in-Chief of Maan News Agency; Efi Triger, a journalist with Israeli Television's Channel 10; and Joe Lauria, a columnist with the Johannesburg *Star* newspaper.

Participants in the second panel highlighted the focus of Security Council resolution 1325 (2000) on the vital role of women in peacemaking and conflict resolution, and its comprehensive programme of work regarding women, peace and security. They cited studies showing that societies which derogated women's rights were more violent and belligerent, and pointed to the resolution's importance in emphasizing the need for women to be involved in peacemaking, not as passive victims, but as possible contributors to solutions. Women were often the victims of war who suffered the most, and in the Israeli-Palestinian context, the distinction between the front and the homeland was almost non-existent, thus involving them in conflict to a greater extent than was usually recognized.

Moderated by Paula Refolo, Director of the Strategic Communications Division in the Department of Public Information, the panel's keynote speakers were Mona Mohamed Alkhalili, Secretary-General of the Union of Palestinian Women of the Palestinian Authority, and Ronit Tirosh, Member of Knesset from the Kadima party. The panellists were Eetta Prince-Gibson, Editor-in-Chief of the *Jerusalem Report*; Vilitcia Barghouti, blogger and

correspondent for the *Voice of Women* newspaper in Ramallah; George Hishmeh, Washington-based syndicated columnist, writer and founding board member of the Jerusalem Fund; and Paul Gillespie, lead writer and columnist for the *Irish Times*.

The Seminar will continue at 9 a.m. on Friday 23 July, when it will hold two panels, on "Harnessing new media for positive change in the Middle East" and on "The Civil Society Initiative: The role of Israeli and Palestinian mayors in contributing to peace and security in the Middle East". The eighteenth meeting will conclude after the second panel discussion.

Panel 2

Mr. LIMA (Cape Verde), Chairman of the Committee on Information and Moderator of the panel on "New media vs. traditional media: allies or adversaries in furthering the peace process", said the existence of new media had changed the way in which traditional media reported breaking news and developments in the Middle East, particularly as they related to the peace process. Those rapid changes were having an impact on reporting the situation.

Keynote Address

Mr. GHAREEB said the past few decades had borne out the warning sounded more than three decades ago that the phenomenal development of new media would revolutionize politics, overwhelming any sense of historical context. The intertwining of politics, nationalism and religion, combined with the absence of historical context, had become a massive hurdle to ensuring accurate coverage of the conflict, without which it was very difficult to understand the basic issues behind it.

He went on to say that the delivery and consumption of news had also changed dramatically with the explosion of new forms of media, such as Internet news sites, blogs and social networking tools like Facebook and YouTube, as well as news alerts on mobile phones. The information revolution was creating new opportunities and realities, offering access with little or no filter to information and opinion, he said, noting that such advances had in the past led to great political, social and other changes. New media had the power to shape the way people thought and behaved, impacting hearts and minds, but it was a double-edged sword, he warned, noting that it had tremendous potential to play a role in conflict resolution, and equally tremendous potential for mischief-making.

Panellists

Mr. GRANADO of the Universidade Nova de Lisboa said he had three ideas for the discussion: first, that new and traditional media could be allies. Traditional media could learn much from new media, which represented an opportunity rather than a menace to communication and to journalists. Traditional media must start working with new media and understand the meaning of the latter, which could help newspapers, television channels and radios reach a much broader audience. Secondly, talking about the media and the role of journalists was sometimes done in an egotistical way when the fact was that journalists were no longer in control. Their gatekeeper role no longer existed since sources now had their own means of communicating with the outside world, although journalists were crucial for credibility and verification of information. Thirdly, he said, because of the Internet, traditional media in many countries were concentrating too much on breaking news, and

thereby failing to fulfil their traditional role of providing context and background information to users.

Mr. AL-LAHAM of Maan News Agency said 65 per cent of Palestinian public opinion was gained from external information sources, and recalled that in 2003 the Palestinian media had been almost entirely destroyed, leaving a void, and leading to fears that there would no longer be an independent voice coming from Palestine. Palestinian society was developing, and its media should remain in Palestine or they would become hostage to foreign money and to the countries where they were located. Thus, from a humanitarian and cultural point of view, the voice of Palestine must be from within Palestine, and should not be a victim of Israeli hatred, he said, adding that Israeli journalists should help in that regard. Furthermore, any journalist wishing for a free media in Palestine had to ask where the money came from, he said, noting that political money came into the Palestinian territories to fund the media, which had repercussions on the content.

Mr. TRIGER of Israeli Television Channel 10 said he believed new media were conducive to the peace process, noting that, since every journalist wished to have as many sources as possible, the number relating to the Arab world and Palestinian communications was huge. New media offered endless opportunities not available only a few years ago to meet and forge links with new people. In closed societies, such as in Iran, the significance of new media was even more critical, particularly with regard to the "Twitter Revolution". Informal advocacy now informed the world, and the understanding and acquaintanceship fostered with other parties could be one of the main roads to peace, he said.

Mr. LAURIA of the Johannesburg *Star* recalled that President Dwight Eisenhower had once said that people wanted peace so much that Governments had better get out of their way and let them have it. In the Middle East, Governments had failed to solve that problem, one possible reason being that they had an interest in prolonging it. However, the people on either side did not want the conflict to continue. The established media, whether Government- or corporate-owned, had their own interests, he stressed, adding that they generally reflected the interests and views of the elite and the ruling circle. It was important to distinguish the difference between blogging and other forms of new media on the one hand, and the established media on the other, since the former seemed to erode certain simple principles upon which journalism rested, namely the need for verification and supporting information. Blogs often did not have that standard.

Interactive Discussion

Among the questions and issues raised from the floor in the ensuing discussion was the importance of interpersonal peace. When increasing numbers of civil society members knew the problems of the other side as well as their own, and expressed their opinion in promoting peace through the voting booth, whether in Israel or Palestine, then the peace process had a greater chance. Modern media were open to all, which meant there was no proof of the credibility of information available on new media. There was a need to guarantee that information and to establish a form of control over it, since it had the potential to encourage those who were irresponsible with information. As for the idea that the peace process was dead, he said there was some cultural cooperation among journalists, seminars and activities, but they were "very marginal" and Governments needed to foster inter-personal relationships further.

In response to a question, Mr. GRANADO said people would never get tired of social media because the world belonged to the children of today, who would grow up to consume media in new and different ways. Print journalists were not gatekeepers, but grave-keepers, he said, adding that they would always be necessary as long as they did their job, and they would be "run over" if they did not. Today a mobile phone that could take pictures was often more powerful than thousands of journalists, he pointed out, warning that unless the latter continued to move forward, modern technology would wipe them out.

Mr. TRIGER described the proximity discussions as a joke, saying there was no political peace process and the political parties were not ready. The more people on one side came into contact with people on the other and realized they were all human beings, the more political ideas would change. People would vote for the parties supporting peace, he said, cautioning, however, that such an eventuality would take many years.

Mr. LAURIA said that the media needed to push leaders on both sides, and, if they were channelling the needs and wants of both sides, then that could have an effect on the leaders. People on both sides must come together and speak out to push the leaders into beginning the talks necessary to achieve peace.

Closing Remarks

Mr. GHAREEB, underlining the important role of the media in the United States, said there was an important difference between those covering international affairs, and those covering domestic matters, which were often much more fiercely debated. Foreign affairs were only interesting to special interest groups and the Government, as illustrated in the "cheerleading" role played by the United States media during the conflict in Iraq.

Mr. LIMA (Cape Verde) said he had grown up with hope in the peace process, and preferred to continue believing in the optimistic way forward as he could not bear to consider the alternative. Israel could bring a lot of things to the world, and would coexist with Palestine tomorrow as the status quo was unsustainable and could not continue, he added.

Panel 3

PAULA REFOLO, Director, Strategic Communications Division, United Nations Department of Public Information and Moderator of the panel on "The role of Israeli and Palestinian women in achieving peace and security in the Middle East", said the hope was for the discussion to expand on proceedings in the previous two panel discussions in reflecting on the contributions that women, including those in the media, were making on the ground. It was a timely moment in which to address the issue, considering that 2010 marked the tenth anniversary of Security Council resolution 1325 (2000), the first to address the impact of war on women, who continued to bear the heaviest impact of ongoing conflict in the Middle East.

Keynote Speakers

Ms. ALKHALILI, of the Palestinian Authority's Union of Palestinian Women, noted that for more than six decades, the Palestinian people had suffered war and occupation, but they were a peace-loving people firmly believing that a just and lasting peace would come. Resolution 1325 (2000) focused on the vital role of women in conflict resolution, and set out a comprehensive programme of work regarding women, peace and security. She said

Palestinian women journalists had overcome a range of difficulties to play a prominent role in covering events in all fields, firmly believing that peace and peaceful resistance was the best way to free the land and establish a Palestinian State. There should be no procrastination in ending the occupation, which only encouraged extremism on both sides and impeded the search for a just solution, she said. Occupation had gone "beyond the limits" and imposed silence, which also impeded peace. All journalists should raise their pens high to work for peace, she urged, stressing that the media must be the voice of a just and lasting peace that would give people all their rights, dignity, and freedoms.

Ms. TIROSH, Member of Knesset, said women were the remedy for the dying peace process and involving them in the negotiation teams and the wider process would bring change. Studies showed that societies which derogated women's rights were more violent and belligerent, which was why the Security Council resolution was so important, as it related to the need for women to be involved not as passive victims, but as possible contributors to solutions. In order to solve conflicts, it was necessary to grasp the needs and interests of the other side, and to do that, there was a need to respect the other's needs, language, narrative and culture. If women were involved in that, the meeting places need not resemble battlefields, but places of mutual cooperation and respect, she said. Women's understanding of political and social issues was vital for justice and peace, she said, emphasizing peace would only be achieved when Israeli and Palestinian women took an equal part in negotiating teams.

Panellists

Ms. PRINCE-GIBSON of the _Jerusalem Report_ said that having a uterus was no guarantee of morality, and oestrogen was not a peace-inducing hormone. However, besides being legal and fair, it was in society's best interest, as well as that of resolving the conflict, to include women. They were often the victims who suffered most from war, and in the current situation the distinction between the front and the homeland was almost non-existent, thus involving women in conflict to a greater extent than was usually recognized. Women learned that while there were certain values, there were also pragmatic needs and solutions, that life was complicated and solutions were not always easy to come by, and that in order to protect those they loved, there was a need to talk truth to the powers in charge. That changed the way in which women saw peace solutions, she said, emphasizing that distinctions between "hard" and "soft" issues should be broken.

Ms. BARGHOUTI of Ramallah's _Voice of Women_ newspaper said there were not enough courageous women media practitioners, due to two factors that made them, as journalists, calculate a lot before telling a story or even writing a word. Palestinian women journalists came from a certain context created by all the tensions pervading the fragile Palestinian society, which in turn impacted their opportunities. A strong, effective legal infrastructure was needed to support the rights and opportunities of women and to create courageous and crusading women journalists who could speak out about the concerns of other women, she stressed, pointing out that in Palestine and other parts of the developing world, journalism was still considered a hardship profession that was not in line with women's nature.

Mr. HISHMEH of the Jerusalem Fund said that, thanks to the "game-changing" Internet the Palestinian position was now often better known and discussed than it had been before. However, not all voices were official voices, and they did not all reflect the official

Palestinian or, indeed, Israeli position. New media could cause embarrassing situations for everybody, as had been seen recently in various cases. The role of women had increased, particularly on television, but Palestinian women had an influence, politically and internationally, through their writing, whether journalism or creative writing, such as short stories and novels. Women could help both sides, through their readers, to understand the passion of the Palestinians.

Mr. GILLESPIE of the *Irish Times* said that when comparing conflicts, there were often as many differences as similarities, thus the comparison between the Northern Ireland conflict and that in the Middle East was not necessarily germane. However, the issue of women largely hinged on the concern that male elites in a top-down process would determine the outcome, rather than through an inclusive process involving the concerns expressed by women. The community activism in which many women in Northern Ireland had been involved for many years had been brought together with the feminist movement in a very positive way, moving beyond a traditional ethno-conflict resolution model, which would accommodate elites on both sides. Women had become agents of change in the Northern Ireland conflict through their involvement in very many ways, he said, adding that Northern Ireland had clear lessons as to what could be done through the cross-community involvement of women.

Interactive Discussion

Ms. TIROSH said the issue was not women's contribution to the peace process, but how to bring more women to the negotiating table. The examples cited during the discussion were not the right ones, as they referred to one woman surrounded by men, where they had no choice other than to behave like men. Women were clever, pragmatic and focused on their target, which was one of their added values, she said, pointing out that peace was not made by countries, but by people.

Ms. PRINCE-GIBSON added that it was not a matter of chromosomes, but one of values and of including in the process people who thought in terms of inclusiveness and diversity. The issue was that in today's society, divisions were along male-female lines. There was a need to bring in the sense of values and types of thinking currently associated with women, and to make them human values, rather than male or female values. As long as society had a division of labour, role, and value, and of what was considered worthwhile and what was not, and as long as women were not brought to the table, the very values that were needed would not be included. The media had not played their role in that regard, and had not promoted diversity, she said.