

Appointment in Cordoba

Dialogue on Peace and Human Rights in Europe and the Middle East

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One of the tasks which the new European Network for Peace and Human Rights set itself in February 2002 was to open a discussion with like-minded people in the Middle East. In November 2002 a meeting in Cordoba, Spain, enabled the dialogue to begin.

Forty-four people from nineteen countries participated in the first session of the Cordoba Dialogue on Peace and Human Rights in Europe and the Middle East, which took place on 25/26 November 2002 in the city's historic Alcazar. The meeting was called under the sponsorship of the City of Cordoba and the Bertrand Russell Peace Foundation.

The meeting was a breakthrough. Representatives of peace and human rights movements in Europe and the United States met with counterparts from Egyptian, Iraqi, Iranian, Kurdish, Palestinian, Turkish, Syrian, Yemeni, and other Middle Eastern organisations. Rosa Aguilar, the Mayor of Cordoba, opened the proceedings. Ahmed Ben Bella, founding President of the Republic of Algeria, participated throughout the deliberations.

The meeting resolved to establish a continuing network to further the cause of peace and human rights, bringing together interested organisations in Europe, the United States and the Middle East/West Asia region.

Bahig Nasser's keynote paper on the Middle East and New US Military Policies highlighted some of the main concerns of the meeting. It is published in full below.

How does the Cordoba meeting relate to the work of the wider peace and human rights movements?

Earlier this year, after extended preparations and preliminary discussions, the European Network for Peace and Human Rights was established. It had been formed during a noticeable upsurge of militarism in world affairs. The Network brings together non-governmental organisations concerned with peace and human rights from all across the European continent. The 300 participants at the founding conference included several voices from the West Asia region; notably, of course, from Palestine and Israel, but also from the Gulf area and Turkey.

Message from Mordechai Vanunu

Mordechai Vanunu has been in captivity in an Israeli gaol for 16 years for blowing the whistle on Israel's nuclear weapons programme

Mordechai wants to personally thank everyone for continuing to think of him and support his cause, and for attending such an important conference. Especially, he says, in these days when important issues are minimised, it is encouraging that there are still many people with a conscience, prepared to fight for peace and human rights.

He would like to have been present himself in Cordoba to talk and thank people, as well as to express his ideas on the issues of weapons of mass destruction in the Middle East. He recently told his brother Asher:

'I realise that I have had to pay a painful price for my actions. But, though many people may say that what I did was not worth the harsh punishment I have received, I still feel I was right to follow my conscience.

'I feel I was speaking for democracy and the right to know, by making this secret information about Israel's nuclear weapons available to the people of Israel and beyond. And I am looking forward to a time when so much energy is not put into war and destruction, but into building a better world, to help the poor and disadvantaged. If I have helped a little in this direction it has made the pain of my imprisonment a little easier.

'Once people see something is wrong they should speak out against the wrong, and reveal the truth'.

One of the tasks which the new Network set itself was to open a dialogue with organisations that share similar concerns in the Middle East / West Asia region. In pursuance of this objective, an agreement was negotiated with the City of Cordoba, where the Mayor, Ms Rosa Aguilar, agreed that the City would jointly sponsor a small conference to bring together representatives from appropriate peace and human rights movements. These organisations accepted the joint invitation with much enthusiasm, not least because Cordoba embodies a unique inheritance of civilisation and tolerance, dating from times which were more than usually troubled.

The meeting was marked by a sense of urgency because the whole West Asian region is now in danger of being sucked into conflict, as parts of it become the target of direct military threats, either immediate or in the middle term, while

others suffer more indirect menaces. These countries are aware that they may be among the next victims of war.

Insecurity is heightened by the new American military doctrine of 'Full Spectrum Dominance'. We have already seen a full-scale war led by the United States in Afghanistan, and before that other conflicts in Somalia, the Sudan and Yemen. Now we have the looming threat of a 'pre-emptive' attack against Iraq in pursuit of 'regime change'.

Worse, there are not only threats against Iraq, but also against Iran: seen by the United States as two parts of the 'axis of evil' in the region. These two states, together with Libya and Syria, figure centrally in the priorities of the recent US examination of its nuclear arsenal and targeting policy, the so-called 'Nuclear Posture Review'. This has rescinded the most important taboo which has hitherto ensured that nuclear weapons have universally been seen as weapons of last resort. US threats to use nuclear weapons in the West Asia region exacerbate the acute tensions already caused there by Israel's large arsenal of nuclear weapons. US threats have been rendered all the more explicit by the publication, in December 2002, of the United States National Strategy to Combat Weapons of Mass Destruction (see page 63).

Of course, there are already many serious conflicts present in Western Asia and North Africa, not only in the Israeli offensive against Palestine, but in Cyprus, in Turkey, in North Africa and the Western Sahara. The spread of all-out war will exacerbate these conflicts even more. Human rights do not prosper in such circumstances. The self-contradictory concept of 'war on terrorism' has itself become a pretext for the curtailment of civil liberties in Europe, West Asia, and elsewhere in the world. Meanwhile, increasing world-wide inequalities provoke discontent, sometimes culminating in violence.

Message from Hans von Sponeck

Count Hans von Sponeck resigned as the UN's Humanitarian Co-ordinator in Iraq in protest at the destruction of the country and the harsh effects on the Iraqi people of the sanctions that have been imposed. He sent the following message: 'What you are trying to achieve in Cordoba is of major importance given the daily deterioration of the relationship between the Middle East and the West. We have a major responsibility in Europe to put an end to this trend.'