

BELGIUM – Meeting Report

Meeting of the European Council of Religious Leaders/Religions for Peace

November 8, 2004---Leuven, Belgium---The Third Meeting of the European Council of Religious Leaders/Religions for Peace (ECRL) opened today in Leuven, Belgium. A group of more than 50 men and women gathered at the Catholic University of Leuven, one of the oldest universities in Europe, to discuss three pressing issues: 1. The contribution of religious communities to peace, stability and democracy in Kosovo; 2. Truth, justice and reconciliation; and 3. Anti-Semitism and Islamophobia in Europe and the responsibility of the religious communities to combat them.

Welcome

Among the participants were ECRL council members (religious leaders of the Roman Catholic, Jewish, Islamic, Orthodox, Protestant, Sikh, Buddhist, Zoroastrian, and Hindu faiths), ECRL advisors, speakers representing the European Commission, European Union, Council of Europe, UNMIK, and ambassadors to the UN and NATO. Fifteen religious leaders from South East Europe were also in attendance.

A tone of cooperation for the proceedings was established with warm welcoming statements of purpose by ECRL Co-Moderators **H.E. Metropolitan Kirill**, of the Russian Orthodox Church, and **H.E. Godfried Cardinal Danneels**, Archbishop of Mechelen-Brussels and Chancellor of the Catholic University of Leuven.

Opening Presentations

H.E. Dr. Michael Weninger, policy advisor to the President of the European Commission, and previously ambassador to the former Yugoslavia, began the presentations by asserting that religious leaders have a significant role to play in ending conflict and maintaining peace. He shared his optimism about the value of religious and political leaders working together to develop ideas and guidelines for the future of South East Europe. He predicted that this cooperation will soon become a formal reality under two articles of the new European Union (EU) Constitution, now in the process of ratification by the member states (at this point in the debate, 24 of the 25 member states appear to favor adoption). He explained that currently there are two religious entities that have legal status; Article 52 will give legal status to the 60 permanent missions of religions, churches, and religious communities. The second Article will grant each religious community acknowledgement according to its own self-understanding as a religion. As Dr. Weninger clarified, the EU recognizes churches and religions as important partners in EU integration and promotes the establishment of an institutionalized dialogue between the EU and the religious communities, although at the moment, no such mechanism exists. He left the group with questions of dialogue and transparency to ponder: Who will participate? What kind of mechanism is most suitable?

This was an apt introduction to the remarks of the three speakers who followed, each of whom brought individual insights to a remarkably consistent message. Three overarching themes emerged:

- The necessity of dialogue, cooperation, and transparency
- The importance of safe, active involvement in the political process
- The value of respect for the integrity and self-identification of each religious community.

Mrs. Verena Taylor, Special Envoy to Serbia and Montenegro from the Council of Europe, pledged the continuation of open lines of communication between the Council of Europe and all religions. She also made reference to the quadrilogue, which is set up to give civil society stakeholders an actual role in decision-making in the Council of Europe, alongside policy makers.

Rev. Leonid Kishkovsky, of the Orthodox Church in America, speaking on behalf of Religions for Peace (RFP), advocated for strong regional and national Inter-religious Councils and pointed out the importance of strengthening them. Allaying any possible concerns from participants, he stressed that RFP is steadfast in its opposition to inter-religious dialogue as an invitation to syncretism. As commented upon by Metropolitan Kirill, the concept of representativeness in the framework of peace, and the rejection of syncretism have opened many doors for religious groups to cooperate.

H.E. Bishop Gunnar Stålsett, Norway, Moderator of ECRL, highlighted the importance of sharing the gifts of faith in the process of uniting Europe. He pointed out that ECRL was established as a vehicle for religious leaders to work together for peace and justice. He concluded his remarks by warning that lasting peace requires more than truth and reconciliation; it also demands that we face the question of justice.

Stability, Democracy and Peace in Kosovo

Invited speakers talked about the situation in Kosovo from the perspectives of NATO and the EU, which set the stage for the panel discussions to come later in the day.

H.E. Ambassador Kai Eide, Norwegian Ambassador to NATO, preceded his formal remarks by addressing his stance on two issues, in an attempt to help explain his perspective: political insecurity and unemployment haunt efforts to move forward with the peace process in Kosovo. First, he straightforwardly offered his opinion that while some in the international community say the situation in Kosovo is too explosive to address the status question at this time, he believes that there will never be a right moment. On the other hand, he argued that setting aside the question of the final status of Kosovo is too dangerous, as it will continue to feed into the frustrations of both the minority and the majority populations. Second, citing an unemployment rate of 60-70%, he expressed compassion when he related the violence of the past March to a desperate economic situation by listening to the youth of Kosovo who told him “You gave us freedom, but you gave us no future.”

Summarizing his July 2004 report to Kofi Annan, *The Situation in Kosovo: Report to the Secretary-General of the United Nations*, H.E. Eide outlined the area’s immediate need for: 1. Capacity-building of people, government, and systems; 2. Visible transfer of more responsibilities and competencies to Kosovo authorities; 3. Resolve to sanction Kosovo

authorities who misuse powers and responsibilities; and 4. Active involvement in the political process of all stakeholders, including the Serb minority. He stated that, in his opinion, it was a mistake for the Kosovo Serbs not to participate in the elections, posing the rhetorical question of how the international community can provide protection to minorities when the minorities do not participate in the mechanism set up to protect their rights.

According to H.E. Eide, these needs present challenges and consequences to the UN in the form of three tests: 1. Maintain strong pressure for progress or it will be difficult, or impossible, to regain initiative and credibility; 2. Aggressively manage the interim during a transfer of authority in order to create a critical sense of ownership and the transfer of relevant experience; and 3. Address the preparations for future status discussions by accepting that the “standards before status” policy lacks credibility. Further, he stated that a worsening economy can be expected to accompany a gradual reduction in an international presence, and that in general, raising the issue of the status of Kosovo sooner rather than later will ease frustration. He also made a plea for the EU to come up with a more coherent economic and political strategy for the whole area of South East Europe.

H.E. Eide closed with an appeal to the religious leaders to speak up for tolerance and cooperation in the multi-ethnic communities of Kosovo. He challenged them to work toward the goal of addressing the needs he outlined for South East Europe with their religious constituencies and also with the international community.

Dr. Alexandros Yannis, representing the EU and proxy for Mr. Stephan Lehne, Director for Western Balkans, Eastern Europe and Central Asia in the European Union, asserted that Kosovo, as part of the Balkans, was part of the EU common policy for the entire region. He reminded participants that the instrument of this policy, the EU Stabilization and Accession Agreement (SAA), has been signed for several of the countries but that the SAA is yet to be signed with Kosovo.

H.E. Ambassador Robert Serry, Deputy Assistant General Secretary for Crisis Management and Operation for NATO, echoed the comments of Stålsett, in saying that justice remains unsolved business--yet it is an important element of reconciliation and essential for the peace process. H.E. Serry depicted the events in March as a kind of wake-up call, though he stated that he does not expect any further major violence in the Balkans. He warned, however, that a political situation cannot be left unsolved, stressing the need for the Balkan countries to cooperate with the ICTY (International Crime Tribunal for Yugoslavia). He also made it clear that NATO’s mandate is to provide a security framework in which the peace process can develop; NATO cannot protect each and every citizen or building in Kosovo. The security provided has to be based in the communities, through engaging local people on the ground. And he mentioned that the Kosovo Police Force (KPS) provides an excellent example of multi-ethnic co-operation working to secure the basic rights of every individual to protection from criminal acts and oppression. This type of initiative has to be further developed and strengthened. He concluded by saying that religious leaders and religious communities should not only be

called upon when a crisis breaks out, but they should be continuously involved in processes promoting peace and dialogue, both with state structures and with other actors in civil society.

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