

## **RABAT+5 SYMPOSIUM**

*Rabat, 6-7 December 2017*

### **17:00 hrs 6.12.17 - The role of faith-based civil society: presentations and lessons learned from their respective national experiences**

*Address by Ms Salpy Eskidjian, Executive Coordinator of RTCYPP, Cyprus*

I greet you from Nicosia, the divided capital of the little island Cyprus and express my deep regret I could not travel to Rabat as planned due to unexpected health reasons and be with you at this important Symposium five years after the Rabat Plan of Action was adopted in 2012.

Allow me to once again thank the UN OHCHR for taking this initiative and for inviting me and giving an opportunity for our small but significant efforts in Cyprus to be shared.

I take this opportunity to extend our heartfelt congratulations to the co-organizers, OHCHR and the Government of Morocco and wish everyone fruitful deliberations for this noble cause.

I am thankful for the opportunity to address you through a video message even if it's not ideal.

My name is Salpy Eskidjian Weiderud, I am one of the architects and facilitators of the first ever dialogue between the mainline Christian and Muslim religious leaders of Cyprus known as Religious Track of the Cyprus Peace Process or RTCYPP. My Office is the only one in Cyprus that works with the faith communities in the island on both sides of the divide on human rights, religious freedom and reconciliation.

Today we mark 3 years since we organized together with to the UN OHCHR and the Former Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief the first ever public lecture in Cyprus on religious freedom, conflict transformation and peacebuilding supported and attended by all the religious leaders of Cyprus and different faith communities.

We still reap the seeds Prof Dr Heiner Bielefeldt sowed in Cyprus with his speeches, reports and recommendations since 2012. They have been ground-breaking for Cyprus and still guide our work and engagement till today.

The SR's report and recommendations, the subsequent visits and further engagement as well as the support, cooperation and partnership with the UN OHCHR guides and supports us immensely for which we are very grateful.

You see "religion" in Cyprus, like everything else, was divided, where no formal contact was made between the Muslim and Christian religious leaders or clerics for over 4 decades.

In a country where the Greek Orthodox Church of Cyprus plays a prominent role in the social, educational, economic and political life of the island and its leadership is not only vocal but also influential on many spheres in the island, the fact that there was never an attempt that succeeded to bring the Greek Orthodox Church of Cyprus and the Turkish Muslim clerics together was shocking

to those of us working on the Cyprus in 2004 when the UN brokered peace plan was up for a referendum and failed.

The RTCYPP formally begun at a meeting in March 2011 as a Swedish government -supported initiative with the Muslim and Greek Orthodox religious leaders under the auspices of the Embassy of Sweden, following a pre-study supported by PRIO in 2009 and quiet diplomacy by the Swedes in 2010 led by Peter Weiderud (current director of the Swedish Institute, Alexandria then the President of the Religious Democrats of Sweden.) From 2012 on gradually also the other leaders of faith communities were invited to join.

Since the 2013 following the support and encouragement of the OCHR and SR on ForB we were able to broker agreements that were unheard of till now, like the crossing of Turkish nationals otherwise not allowed to cross to the government controlled areas in the south to pray three times a year at the most significant Muslim place of worship on the island. We managed to ensure monthly worship either at the small chapel or the Main Cathedral of the monastery of the most important Apostle for Cyprus – Apostolos Barnabas. The Mufti was not just acknowledged but since the visit of the SR he was welcomed to cross freely to oversee the administration of the mosques on both sides of the divide, despite the fact that he himself is Turkish national.

For Cyprus, faith for rights in a way started in 2011 when we managed to reach an agreement supported also by the two leaders of the communities, that the religious leaders would acknowledge each other, meet and work together to restore religious freedom on the island once again, end incitement to hatred and promote respect and coexistence.

Through this joint efforts, we managed to open churches and mosques that were closed up since 1964 or 1974 for the first time for worship, encourage the cleaning up and restoration of places of worship and at all times in full cooperation of all the religious leaders despite the political climate.

We managed to have three very important historic joint statements, one on incitement against violence and hatred and another on violence against women and many amazing joint activities and events.

All unheard of only ten years ago!

We still have a long way to go. For every step forward we still have steps backwards or sideways but the most important achievement for us is the fact that since the RTCYPP, religious leaders of Cyprus advocate for human rights and religious freedom together. They stand up for the rights of the other and do not shy away to condemn violence together.

Office of RTCYPP welcomed the Faith for Rights initiative and presented it to the 5 religious leaders of Cyprus in June.

Following their support, the document was shared with all faith communities in Cyprus for study, reflection and action.

The Office of RTCYPP has since committed itself to contributing to the UN OHCHR Faith for Rights initiative not only by introducing and promoting it but by making it relevant in and for Cyprus.

Since October, we have;

- a. Included a special section on our website called Faith for Rights.
- b. Commissioned the translation of the Beirut Declaration and the 18 Commitments into Greek and Turkish as a contribution to OHCHR.
- c. Convened and hosted the Third RTCYPP Round Table for Human Rights in order to introduce the Faith for Right and were privileged to have Human Rights Officer from

OHCHR among us. The round table discussions showed that the commitments could be used as foundations for projects on education for human rights with children and youth.

- d. Commissioned two stories one in English and one in Turkish on the Faith for Rights shared it with all media outlets as well as to all faith communities and non-faith based civil society organizations.
- e. Highlighted the Faith For Rights initiative & Rabat +5 symposium on social media.
- f. As part of 16Days of Activism we launched a social media campaign in three languages on Violence against Women on November 25 and linked it to Faith for Rights.

It is important to note that the involvement of our Office means that we have the support of the mainline Christian and Muslim Religious leaders of Cyprus which in itself is significant, especially now when sadly once again the UN led peace talks have stopped.

Having religious and non-religious actors come together to initiate a cross-disciplinary dialogue on human rights such as the RTCYPP Round Table for Human Rights in Cyprus is only a start.

The previous Round Tables for Human Rights, held in 2013 and 2015 respectively, have been successful and inclusive but the tangible results in between the discussions have been limited.

I see the potential that the Beirut Declaration with its 18 commitments could prove to be the cross-disciplinary vehicle needed to engage the faith communities on human rights in Cyprus in a more systematic and structured way, not least with children and youth in mind as one of the target groups.

It was clear that the RTCYPP Third Round Table for Human Rights in Cyprus sparked a clear interest for OHCHR's "Faith for Rights"

We hope to build on this platform to advance dialogue on human rights with religious communities and non-religious actors in Cyprus using the 18 Commitments.

We also hope to further discussion and action on rights with all the leadership and representatives of the faith communities in Cyprus using the 18 commitments

- To conclude I would like to share some examples of our projected plans for 2018 which we will all link one way or another to F4R
- Religious Leaders have approved to be present and jointly mark the 70th Anniversary of the UDHR where we will highlight the F4R initiative with all the commitments and declarations.
- Social Media awareness-raising campaign on each of the 18 points using different mediums.
- Round Table with educators for religious studies from all the faith communities to draft a work plan for how we engage and involve children and youth.
- Round Table discussions with Journalists on the different commitments.
- Joint action with UNHCR for refugees.

As a carefully crafted document the F4R gives us on the local level, the global umbrella to belong to, share, learn and together try to ensure that all the commitments are used.

Together with religious communities and other civil society representatives, we hope to pave the way in Cyprus and bring this discussion forward in a process with concrete projects in 2018.

To be realistic and contextual we basically want to hook our efforts since 2009 into the F4R initiative and use it as the framework that inspires and guides.

To ensure that the commitments are monitored and implemented, different initiatives inspire each other, there is networking and collaboration, it would be great if the UN OHCHR could include all initiatives that are working on F4R on a special page of the UN called F4R and link us to one another.

Think of a F4R certification like the World Wildlife Fund or Fair Trade Certificates we can all carry the “stamp” or “logo” proudly and inspire others to join.

We hope we can all come back together in 5 years’ time for Rabat plus 10 and the 75th anniversary for the UDHR to take stock together and celebrate our achievements inspiring others.

Thank you so much for your attention and for providing us this unique opportunity and honour to be part of this noble initiative.