

ENGLISH only



United States Mission to the OSCE

Statement on Anti-Semitism

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From May 8th to May 10th, 2002, the first United Nations General Assembly Special Session on Children was held. Three hundred and fifty children drawn from both government and from NGOs gathered and crafted their own statement to the General Assembly. Thirteen-year-old Gabriella Arrieta from Bolivia, together with 17-year-old Audrey Cheynut from Monaco, were elected by their peers to speak. In their address they affirmed:

"We respect the rights of the child. We see an end to exploitation, abuse and violence. ...We see an end to the vicious cycle of poverty. We see the provision of education ...and while we promise to support the actions you take we also ask for your commitment and support ...because the children of the world are misunderstood. We are not the sources of the problems. We are the resources that are needed to solve them. We are not expenses, we are investments. We are not just young people... we are the children of the world and, despite our different backgrounds, we share a common reality. We are united by our struggle to make the world a better place for all. You call us the future, we are also the present."

Children indeed embody both the present as well as the future ...for what they learn today will impact their behavior in the future. On May 7th, 2002 just one day before the convening of the Special Session on Children, IQRA – an Islamic satellite channel with viewers in Europe, in addition to the Middle East Broadcast – a program directed at Moslem women and children, Ms. Doua Amer interviewed 3½- year-old Basmallaah with the following questions:

"Do you know who the Jews are?" "Yes," answered the little girl. "Do you like them?" "No," was the response. "Why?" Basmallah answered, "Because they are monkeys and pigs ...and also because they tried to poison the wife of our prophet."

Children learn through exposure to a broad spectrum of influences including family, friends, teachers and community leaders. The very young learn prejudice and negative labeling as they mimic the actual language spoken by the adults in their individual environment. No one can regulate these verbal influences to which children are exposed. However, there are two significant educational tools for which content can be constructed and monitored in an effort to achieve specific behavioral goals: the media and school curriculum.

The media is a very powerful educational tool to promote specific attitudes, perceptions and knowledge. The media has the capacity to impact society by helping to shape children's understanding about themselves and others with either a positive or negative perspective. Basmallah, in her answers to Ms. Amer was in all probability mimicking what she had heard from the adults in her life. However, by repeating the negativity of those words on television, without correction by Ms. Amer, Basmallah was connecting with her peers and Ms. Amer was teaching acceptance of this stereotype to the children watching.

The media is unique in that it can educate beyond the limitation of borders. This capacity has been enhanced with the technological development and accessibility of satellite broadcast transmission and the Internet. It has the ability to help children link to one another and create opportunities for communication and enrichment. It is a resource that needs to be prioritized in an effort to teach respect, foster cross-cultural understanding and thereby challenge the mindset of prejudice and intolerance.

This summer a new educational media initiative, Sesame Stories, will begin airing in the Middle East. It is an answer to the media images presented by IQRA Arab TV and other Middle Eastern broadcasters that serve to dehumanize and vilify "the other." By presenting positive images of themselves as well as "the others" ...their Israeli, Jordanian and Palestinian neighbors... and by providing these children with alternatives for dealing with anger other than violence, Sesame Stories hopes to help develop a new generation of children in the Middle East who will not hate. The series' format will integrate prosocial stories from regional children's literature to reinforce the key educational goals of teaching respect and understanding.

Sesame Stories builds upon the success of its groundbreaking series, Rechov Sumsum/Shara'a Simsim, the Israeli Palestinian co-production of Sesame Street that premiered in 1998. Research results have confirmed that exposure to the series helped Palestinian and Israeli children learn more about themselves and helped breakdown cultural stereotypes.

However, the Sesame workshop recognizes the need for the lessons of Sesame Stories to echo off the screen as well. To this end it has worked together with local educators and regional experts in the field of child psychology to produce teacher's guides, educational posters and audio video cassettes to be used in early childcare centers, preschools, kindergartens and at home.

The European Union and the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs are to be applauded for participating in the international coalition of funders. But Sesame Stories is only one media effort currently focused on the Middle East. The increase in anti-Semitic incidents, including vandalism and violence that is evident in Europe today, affirms the urgency for similar media content within the OSCE member states. There needs to be a global initiative to produce educational media that will teach children mutual respect and understanding. They are the foundation of every society.

In addition to focusing on media initiatives, there is also a need to direct attention to curriculum together with the textbooks and other supportive classroom materials. The classroom experience can provide the means for students to develop a positive self-image, accept diversity and learn to behave as responsible individuals. Alternatively, it can provide a fertile breeding ground for the teaching of prejudice, intolerance and violence. The classroom lessons and chosen textbooks are clear indicators as to the cultural orientation and values that each society endorses and wants to have transmitted to its children.

In the past there has been significant discussion at the OSCE regarding the need to mandate holocaust education in all grades. The inhumanity of man towards his fellow man as experienced during the holocaust and continuing genocides represents prejudice in the extreme. It is essential that we teach our children the skills to challenge prejudice and intolerance whenever and wherever it is found.

In an effort to complement holocaust education curriculum the addition of character education programs similar to the Words Can Heal Initiative that I co-chair would be most beneficial. The Words Can Heal Character Education Program is a comprehensive curriculum designed for use in schools, youth clubs and other supervised group situations. Its goal is to create awareness among children that words have the power to hurt or to heal. The program teaches children that they can improve their lives and their communities by speaking truthfully with compassion and decency. The program includes lesson plans, collateral visual aids, the words can heal pledge and a music assembly platform that effectively reaches out to children of all ages, races and backgrounds.

Mayor James Hahn of Los Angeles attests to the importance of the Words Can Heal program:

"Students learn not only about the destructive nature and consequences of verbal violence and gossip, but also about the power of positive communication with peers and adults alike. Most importantly, the children feel empowered with the knowledge that their words can really make a difference ... communities throughout the country would benefit greatly from participation in the Words Can Heal educational campaign."

I encourage the OSCE members to reflect on Mayor Hahn's assessment and consider either adapting the Words Can Heal program or creating a character education curriculum of their own.

Finally, there is a need to review the textbooks that are used in the classroom. B'nai B'rith International, in cooperation with the Center for Monitoring the Impact of Peace, has engaged in an ongoing review of textbooks used in the Middle East. To date B'nai B'rith has published two summary booklets, "The Palestinian Children at The School of Hate" and "Jihad, Jews and Anti-Semitism in Syrian School Texts."

The textbooks reviewed were used in teaching Grammar, Literature, Geography, History, Civics and Religious curricula. In each case study the textbooks were

found to be both blatantly anti-Semitic and promoting racial hatred and martyrdom. B'nai B'rith subsequently communicated with policy makers as well as the funding sources for the publication of these texts. UNESCO responded and assigned a commission to study the content of both Palestinian as well as Israeli textbooks, but more needs to be done.

Whether funded by state monies, religious institutions or private donors, textbooks and curricula that do not promote tolerance and understanding between peoples and nations need to be challenged and replaced. We need to establish periodic audits of our own educational curriculum and textbook content and encourage the establishment of similar reviews by those for whom we provide assistance. As Professor Al-Hamid al Ansari, Dean of the Faculty of Islamic Law at the University of Qatar so aptly notes, "We must examine our curriculum, and evaluate our educational methods and our media. This will be the right beginning for the fight against the culture of terrorism."

Therefore, let us resolve as representatives of governments, NGO's and broadcast organizations to work collectively with educators, child development specialists, writers and producers.

Let us employ all appropriate platforms towards the creation of curriculum and media content that, used together, will educate and provide the skills for children around the world to learn respect, foster understanding and overcome prejudice and intolerance.

If we can prioritize these goals and commit our individual, institutional and governmental resources we will reinforce the process of effecting positive change in the lives of children through education, counter anti-Semitism and prejudice and lay the foundation for a more peaceful future.