

May 24 2009; International Women's Day of Peace and Disarmament: Voices of Peace from the Balkans and the Caucasus

By Merle Gosewinkel

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Regardless of the first summer day outside, the hall of Rasa - Centre for World Cultures was well filled with somewhat 80 people when Lenneke Hoedemaker, the moderator of the panel discussion, welcomed the participants of this year's May 24 event, organized by the IFOR Women Peacemakers Program (WPP) in collaboration with Musicians without Borders. Every year WPP organizes a public event and a publication for 24 May, the International Women's Day for Peace and Disarmament. This year the May 24 celebration focused on women activists and musicians working for peace from the Balkans and the Caucasus region.

The diverse group of the panellists, ranging from UN level to grassroots activists, proved to be a good mixture as the lively and fruitful discussions showed.

After each panel speaker gave a short introduction of her work as well as the situation of her country, the group started discussing why it is actually important to include women in peace building, and how the women in different countries are struggling to have their voices heard. The women, who came from countries such as Armenia, Georgia and former Yugoslavia, gave first-hand information on how women are trying to master their lives in post-conflict areas, and how patriarchal societies prevent women from getting involved in shaping democracy. These personal stories were complemented by contributions by Lesley Abdela, a British political journalist who worked in both regions, and speakers from the UN (Gulnara Shahinian - United Nations Special Rapporteur on Contemporary Forms of Slavery) and the European Parliament (Kathalijne Buitenweg), who provided the audience with a broader political view on the issue of women in peace building, with emphasis on United Nations Security Council 1325 and its implications.

This led to a discussion about what people here in the Netherlands could do to support the women and their work in the Balkans and the Caucasus. The panellists also discussed how tools such as UN resolutions on gender issues could be of use in the practice of women's fight for political participation, and what could be improved on higher political level to make these resolutions more effective on the ground.

At the end the speakers agreed that still a lot has to be done in the area of gender and peace building, but that some steps in the right direction have at least been taken. These inspiring discussions were rounded off by musical intermezzos of women musicians from the respective regions.

After a delicious lunch, the participants could choose between different workshops on the political aspect of women in peace building, the use of music in trauma healing in post conflict regions, as well as a documentary on women in the Balkans.

The whole day ended with a concert of the musicians from the regions, providing the audience with an opportunity to have a glimpse at the strong cultural heritage of the countries and regions discussed in the morning.

A more detailed report on the whole conference will be posted on WPP's website soon:

www.ifor.org/WPP