

An exchange of civilisations

Following the September 11 attacks there was an intensive Western media campaign against the Arab and Islamic world. Also, the U.S. and European countries issued new legislations that make it easier to violate the rights of Muslims and Arabs. As a consequence, hostile feelings against Arabs and Muslims escalated and the image of the Arab and Islamic civilisation was tarnished.

To counteract this, a two-day conference was held at the Cairo headquarters of the Arab League with the participation of more than a hundred Arab intellectuals and thinkers of different ideologies. They discussed this media campaign against the Arab and Islamic world and the issue of the "clash of civilisations" which the West claims has occurred between them and the Islamic world.

The conference was headed by Amr Mousa, the Arab League Secretary General. The title of the conference 'The dialogue of civilisations: an exchange and not a clash' was, thus, meant to counter the idea that a clash between civilisations is inevitable as promoted by some Western thinkers, including Harvard professor, Samuel P. Huntington, and his essay 'The clash of civilisations', among other works.

At the conference, participants expressed their concern over the Western campaigns

Consequently, the Arab and Islamic culture is part of the historical development of all nations.

The participants also stressed that extremism, religious strictness and violence - which have escalated with the continuous Israeli aggression and the rejection of the establishment of an independent Palestinian state according to the international resolutions - are a result of political, economic, social and cultural deficiencies.

At the conclusion of the summit, the participants, led by Prince Al Hassan bin Talal of Jordan, chief of the Arab

Thought Forum, Ghasan Salama, the Lebanese Minister of Culture, and Ibrahim Nafe, chairman of the Arab Journalism Federation, declared a plan to be presented to the Arab leaders and to be discussed by them at the Arab summit which will convene in Lebanon next March. The first phase of this programme will be implemented immediately by the general sec-

The F. Post 5-12-01

Huda Fawzi

culture conflict

recommended the following for implementation:

- o Organising forums of Arab and Western thinkers to discuss Arab and international topics, and publishing the work of these forums in different languages.

- o Translating Arab writings into international languages and publishing them on the Internet.

- o Establishing and financing academic programmes that relate to the Arab and Islamic civilisation.

- o Setting up an annual prize at the Arab League to be grant-

Participants also recommended the following steps to be implemented by Arab countries:

- o Urging Arab thinkers and intellectuals to help promote the sense of belonging to the Arab civilisation and pride in the Arab culture, as well as encourage communication with other civilisations.

- o Inviting governments to appoint scholars who are fluent in foreign languages to inform people about the peaceful and tolerant principles of Islam that rejects extremism and fanaticism

and supporting the dialogue between civilisations. He pointed to the Western articles and officials that resulted in all Arabs being accused of terrorism. He added that the Western media and European officials are responsible for the wrong image of the Arab and Islamic civilisation as they had declared in different statements the superiority of the Western civilisation compared with the Arab and Islamic civilisation.

He also stressed that the Arab League is against terrorists who use Islam for their own interests, and that these groups are neither part of this peaceful religion nor of the Arab community.

On the other hand, Prince Al Hasan bin Talal noted that discrimination against Islam and Arabs exists in many countries and that there are many ways to counter such discrimination, including publishing Arab writings in foreign languages, changing the academic curriculums, and restructuring the Security

colonials used to promote the idea that the colonised states were inferior.

Writing in the UAE-based Al Khaleej, Dr. Hassan Madani says that the West dominates media not only in the Western countries but also in the rest of the world.

He adds that the West has no knowledge of the Arab and Islamic culture. Hence, he notes, the issue is more complicated and cannot be solved by only establishing a public relations network.

Along the same lines, Abdullah Rasheed, writing in the UAE-based Al Ittihad, stresses that the Arab and Islamic world should have a strong and developed media that can reach people in the West and present a correct picture of the Arabic and Islamic culture.

This requires establishing an Arab satellite TV channel in English and French which, in turn, needs financing. Hence, he suggests that donations to the established fund should increase.

Ahmad Al Rabe, writing in the UK-based Asharq Al Awsat, encourages the increase of funds to finance the Arab media. He suggests that one per cent of the military expenditure in the Arab world be allocated to media and public relations.

This can then lead to the creation of an Arab lobby in

Throughout history, human civilisation has always been based on integration and interaction of different societies, and the variety of cultures has been the main factor for the advancement of mankind. For this reason, the conference has succeeded in its mission. 'The dialogue of civilisations: An exchange and not a clash' will sustain such success.

over the Western campaigns which distorted Arab culture and civilisation, reiterated their condemnation of terrorism and warned of the danger of confusing terrorism with the legitimate liberation movements against occupation.

They expressed their view that civilisations comprise dominant beliefs, cultural heritage and human interaction, and they stressed the importance of having a variety of cultures so as to enhance human creativity and social integration.

Thus, interaction of civilisations and understanding of other cultures leads to the development of humanity and no single civilisation can achieve this on its own.

the general secretariat of the Arab League.

The programme includes establishing a cultural forum; appointing delegates to the Arab League who will deal with dialogue between civilisations; appointment of delegates to follow up the activities of Arab communities abroad; establishing a fund from individual and governmental donations to support the Arab culture plan which was drafted at this conference; and establishing national committees to deal with intellectual dialogue and cultural interaction.

The first donation of a million dollars was made by President His Highness Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan.

The plan Arab Intellectuals

ed to a study that encourages dialogue between civilisations and clarifies the Arab and Islamic civilisation to the international community.

- o Producing films about the Arab and Islamic civilisation in foreign languages.

- o Setting up a network of Arab and Western intellectuals to respond to the media campaigns against the Arab culture.

- o Inviting the Arab League to consult with the UN and UNESCO to incorporate academic programmes about various cultures and civilisations.

- o Instituting legal establishments to counter through legal proceedings the racism against Arabs abroad.

- o Inviting the Arab Organisation for Education, Culture and Science to prepare academic programmes that teach about different civilisations and cultures.

Intellectuals' opinions Amr Mousa, in a statement made at a press conference held after the two-day meeting, declared that terrorism is an international phenomenon; that interaction, understanding and agreement form the core of social relations; and that it is necessary to set up effective cultural policies to counter the distortion of social and cultural concepts.

He confirmed that the conference aimed at correcting the misconception of Islam in the

COUNCIL.

Ghasan Salama pointed out that the problem which the Arab world faces is not religious but political in nature, that is related to the Palestinian cause.

Dr Atif Al Eraqi, a participant, believes that there is no hostility between the Arab and Islamic civilisation and the West, and that the Western hostility is only against the Taliban's wrong understanding and application of Islam.

Dr Hosam Issa, another participant, is of the opinion that the recent campaigns of hostility against Arabs and Muslims is not incidental, that discrimination against Islam and Muslims is a part of the cultural heritage of the West as a result of colonisation since the

Washington which will ensure security for Arabs.

In essence, the conference laid the first stone in the task of rectifying the image of the Arab civilisation in the West. The way ahead might seem long and complicated, but success is inevitable with such determination.

Throughout history, human civilisation has always been based on integration and interaction of different societies, and the variety of cultures has been the main factor for the advancement of mankind. For this reason, the conference has succeeded in its mission.

'The dialogue of civilisations: an exchange and not a clash' will sustain such success.