

**Remarks of Mr. Bertan Selim**  
**To the 55<sup>th</sup> Annual DPI/NGO Conference**  
**11 September 2002**

**My parents once told me: ‘Your life is your time! You have a right to it and you shall live it as you see fit’. This right to life has been acknowledged by the United Nations and ratified by countries around the world.**

**Unfortunately, however, conflicts continue to be the reality of many children and families throughout the world, inflicting trauma and suffering in their lives.**

**This is the image I have seen throughout my life, especially during the crisis in my native Macedonia as well as in the Kosovar refugee camps in Macedonia and Kosovo when I worked towards overcoming conflict, reconciling and finding new hope for the future. It is a struggle engendered by one’s identity, be it race, religion, ethnicity or language. An ongoing struggle I myself fought in Macedonia because of my Albanian and Turkish ethnicity. I am here today to share with you my experiences and views on issues which concern young people**

**like me, who live in post-conflict environments where ethnic and religious tensions prevail: How do we bring people from post- conflict societies together? How do we reconcile neighbors who have become enemies? And why is there resistance to it?**

**Working in the Kosovar refugee camps in Macedonia as well as local and international non-governmental organizations in national reconciliation proved to be a demanding job. Namely, dealing with families that lost loved ones, people who were witnesses to massacres, to victims of torture and rape – making reconciliation profoundly more difficult.**

**To achieve reconciliation one must initially work on rebuilding trust – something that can be and eventually was achieved with great effort, communication and patience. We could not help them forget though – we merely helped them understand the past, learn from the present so as to give shape to the future.**

**I recognized that traumatized people have no choice, no opportunities, no resolution to change. They maintain an identity within a culture that breeds hate. This is their reality and they are unable to see beyond it. When people are exposed to diversity, they feel threatened and unsafe. Therefore they ghettoize in order to protect themselves from the unknown. This threat leads to fear that stems from a lack of knowledge. And of course, this fear leads to hate. And hate is what ignites conflicts.**

**The educational system is an important factor that needs to be addressed. Namely, the outdated and obsolete curriculum taught in schools in Kosovo and Macedonia, where the emphasis on patriotism turns into radical nationalism.**

**Moreover, schools are of one ethnicity or one religion due to this apartheid. Newcomers are often openly discriminated by peers and school authorities. Furthermore, children are taught to be amenable not self-critical. Knowledge is served to them without a chance of introspection or question. On top of this,**

**physical punishment is still encouraged in most schools and by some parents. Abuse is at a very high level. Thus children think victory is achieved through the use of physical power.**

**We succeeded in reconciling a group of young people of different descents in a local NGO I was involved in, in Macedonia. We achieved concurrence through empowerment and utility of self-critical methods.**

**Initially, it was very hard for them to open up amongst one another. In this fashion, people were very emotional about certain topics. Joint activities such as debates, parliament simulations and trust games were introduced so as to view the situation from a different point of view. Thus people of different races, religions and ethnicity got to know each other – understanding was at a much deeper level. We established that people did not know enough about each other’s cultures and backgrounds, that people take for granted what major**

**stereotypes dictate, which leads to misunderstandings and conflicts. Once fear and prejudice are dealt with, reconciliation is possible.**

**This is not to say that everything proceeded smoothly; there were problems. Some people were simply unable to communicate despite our efforts. This was not due to peoples' heritages, but solely subject to difference in character.**

**However, self-critical methods are not always realistically applicable to everyone in post-conflict societies. One must always bear in mind that there is a difference between personal healing and reconciliation. I learned that the people in such post-conflict societies are demoralized, angry and ready to avenge. One must find a common ground when attempting to heal these people – something that all can appreciate and understand because it gives people a sense of comfort, confidence and understanding. In cases like this we must teach compromise! After having experienced conflict most people are not aware that there exists another side to the story.**

**Traumatized people feel threatened and scared. And so they lose touch with reality. Empirically, such people should gather under the auspices of a neutral facilitator and share their experience. It is a good idea to present a session on video with people from the conflicting side similarly expressing their own experiences. This can help them come to realize that there are no winners in such conflicts rather they are all made losers.**

**Unfortunately, resistance to reconciliation is still omnipresent in the world. It is very difficult for people who have been emotionally involved in the conflict to forgive.**

**Any program must firstly give a sense of control back to the victim. It is only then that the traumatized victim of conflict can see himself or herself as an individual and not an object, with values worthy of respect. And it is only then that he or she achieves personal healing and is promoted survivor. This mitigates the resistance allowing people to reintegrate, and possibly reconcile. In many instances reconciliation is**

successful only if the populations initiate it among themselves. Furthermore, in order to solve a conflict and hence reconcile the traumatized population one must first be anthropological and then pragmatic. Anthropologic because we must study and understand the culture, the language and people that we are trying to help. And then, try to identify a common ground to help the parties in conflict; and pragmatic because one needs to adequately utilize this knowledge on an entire nation. It is because of the lack of anthropologic research that ad hoc foreign intervention and foreign mediation have on countless occasions proven unsuccessful.

Local and international NGOs have been credited with and proven to alleviate trauma and reconcile the population by managing and financing peace sustaining projects. One such successful program I took part in was the Balkan Youth Reconciliation Seminar Series organized and facilitated by the Friendship Ambassadors Foundation, a non-for-profit organization which I am representing today. Here we worked

**on ways in which to achieve friendship, thus reconciliation through the arts which was our common ground. Through this cultural exchange I made friends from all over the Balkans. We learned to appreciate our differences by getting acquainted with each others' traditions and customs, arts and dances, languages and cuisines. We felt comfortable talking about the terrors that each of us had seen. However, not by pointing to the other as a culprit, but by looking at the other as a friend. We broke through stereotypes and began, some of us for the first time, looking at others without prejudice. Initially, all we knew about each other was what was served to us by the media. Thus, clearly, the media has proven to be extremely influential and a powerful instrument not only during the conflict, but in post-conflict times as well. In Macedonia, for example, a TV series was created depicting the life of children in an ethnically and religiously mixed neighborhood in Macedonia. The series showed children being discriminated**

**against, but also showed the whole neighborhood stand up for the rights of one child, their friend, who as a minority was discriminated against. Thus children formed their role-models and learned to appreciate the series and its morals.**

**Consequently, some of those very children have reacted to parents' prejudice and stereotypes in real life.**

**Like the media, NGOs too have helped considerably in this field. However, governments of post-conflict states should also make an honest effort and commitment to support projects like this and to overcome the differences instead of enabling hate and intolerance.**

**From my experience in refugee camps and living in Macedonia, I believe that the best way to mitigate and reconcile is by employing reforms in the educational system; reforms that would represent and appreciate people equally without stereotyping or prejudice. Teachers should be trained to stop violence and discrimination in the classrooms and eradicate physical punishment. As B. F. Skinner said:**

**‘Education is what survives when what has been learned has been forgotten’.**

**Reconciliation is a slow process achieved solely through empirical techniques. Long-lasting, in-depth change can only start at the level of the individual and is impossible to impose from above. The International Community, governments and NGOs should make a robust commitment in this direction, utilizing today’s most powerful industry – the media; Military intervention and forceful mediation have neither successfully improved societies nor achieved peace and reconciliation. We must instead find a humanly common ground and seek the answer in knowledge because today you are the more you know. At the end of the day only among themselves can the population achieve concurrence. And therefore we must encourage the local population and help those who are willing to undertake reconciliation initiatives as well as supporting projects of the same purpose.**

**I believe that the new generation has had enough conflicts – we do not deserve to grow up in such environments because this is our time, or in the spirit of my parents, this time is our life. It is time to change because it is now that we have that choice. We have people that will speak up, and I am one of them!**