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HANS-CHRISTOF VON SPONECK'S SPEECH AT THE EU PARLIAMENT

A glimpse into the NAQBA of the Palestinian people

Last week, at the invitation of the EU Parliament, Hans-Christof von Sponeck opened a Naqba exhibition in Strasbourg. It was a small but symbolically a not unimportant event.

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Hans-Christof von Sponeck

NAQBA

Opening Remarks EU Parliament Strassburg 25 February 2014

What is on display here is about the life of a people, a glimpse into the NAQBA of the Palestinian people.

Naqba, the Palestinian equivalent of the Jewish Shoa? Certainly not! If there is anything Naqba and Shoa share, it is the horrific suffering the two communities have had to endure. European involvement in the politics of the Near East should always keep this in mind.

Let me be clear: This exhibition is not about political solutions nor about specific claims for territory; it is not about whether victims have the right to victimize. It is not about the immense richness of culture of the area in which Palestinians and Israelis live. While this is important to appreciate, it is not part of the exhibition. The exhibition has nothing to do with the current debate of the next steps in the Palestinian pursuit of statehood and membership in the United Nations and other international organizations, important as these are.

It may surprise when I argue, however, that this exhibition may contribute to reconciliation between two peoples, peoples who have lived side by side for millennia and long before the Ottoman Empire.

Why "a contribution to reconciliation"? Because the provision of credible information and knowledge of what happened to the Palestinian people at the end of the 19th century and since is the objective of this exhibition. The understanding of the Palestinian past is thus an important basis to argue for change and a pre-requisite for reconciliation as well as a powerful ingredient for peace.

People have a right to information. Withholding information constitutes not only a violation of international law but intensifies division and conflict. How dangerous the withholding of credible information can be for a people and for resolving a conflict, I have experienced first hand during 1998-2000 as the then UN Assistant Secretary General responsible for the humanitarian programme in Iraq. Lack of such credible information, and worse, the deliberate spreading of false information contributed decisively to Iraqi suffering during the years of sanctions. It also laid the ground for eventually justifying an illegal invasion of Iraq in 2003.

The EU Parliament in search for truth had organized at the time hearings – I attended these – to correct serious and deliberate distortions about the plight of the Iraqi people. That ultimately neither the EU Parliament nor the UN Security Council succeeded in averting disaster, tragic as it was for the Iraqi people, does not lessen in any way the significance of this initiative.

Anyone who wants to see in this exhibition more than what it is: a glimpse into the painful history of a people, is a detractor with doubtful credentials.

We can be sure, there will be those who are on stand-by to dismiss this exhibition as another expression of anti-semitism. The word that fits here is "nonsense". I would say to them: "The majority of European civil society is no longer willing to accept ready-made but false accusations in order to protect un-defendable self-interests. I would add: Have the standing to come and see this exhibition and realize that you have been wrong." This would be the moment when healing can start. "Do not judge anyone before you have walked a mile in his shoes!", so an Arab saying goes.

We must salute here the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE) and individual members like Ivo Veigl and especially Alexandra Thom who has

like two vagabonds and especially, Alessandra Merli who has been instrumental in making the NAQBA exhibition in the EU Parliament possible. Yet again, MEPs have shown the leadership people appreciate as an important contribution to constructive engagement. It should remind Europe of its responsibility to do what it takes in promoting the knowledge for peace.

The exhibition has been shown to-date in over 100 places in Switzerland, Austria and Germany thanks to the relentless efforts by Frau Ingrid Rumpf, chairperson of the organization "Flüchtlingskinder in Libanon". Guenter Schenk and his colleagues of the "Collectif Jude-Arabe pour la Palestine", based here in Strasbourg, must be thanked for their commitment and sense of justice with which they have helped to set up the exhibition and this in friendly cooperation with the EU parliamentary administration.

In conclusion: I see the "Naqba" exhibition as an important, a very important initiative helpful in building the case for the Palestinians' right to peace and the right for justice for all. The end to double-standards will be the beginning for equal playing fields.

Maybe the time will come when Palestinians living in a sovereign state and Israelis living in a sovereign state will join hands in mounting a joint Naqba & Shoa exhibition to prove that peace is possible after all and that the human suffering of two communities can become a part of history.

H.C. Graf Sponeck, former UN Assistant Secretary General

Strasbourg, 25 February 2014

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