

UN International Day of Peace Report - South London

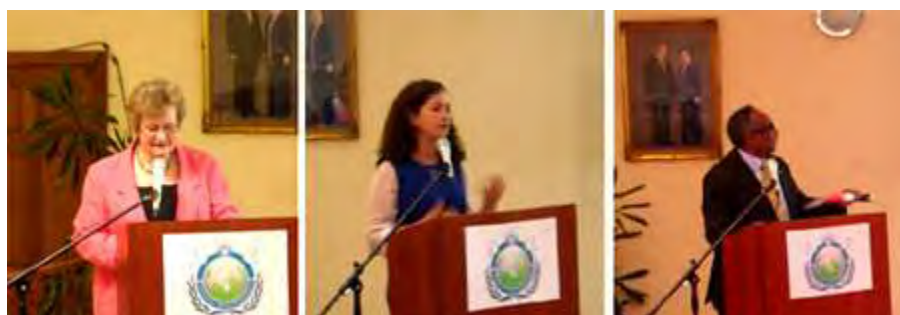
Lance Gardiner
September 19, 2015



“Refugees should be supported with respect, generosity and dignity,” affirmed Anca Anreopoulos, Regional Operations Manager for Migrant Help, on the occasion of UPF South London’s commemoration of the UN International Day of Peace. In resonance with the UN theme for this year’s commemoration: “Partnerships for Peace – Dignity for All”,

she explained how the public perception of refugees and asylum seekers has been changing as tragic images of distressed women, children and the disabled flash across our television screens. However, she cautioned that the media tends to sensationalize – the real stories are of human desperation and sadness born of trauma, combined with a deep desire to maintain self-dignity.

A receptive group of nearly 40 participants attended UPF South London’s 6th annual commemoration of the Day of Peace, held on 19 September at the Peace Embassy in Thornton Heath. With a focus on the countries of North Africa as well as the current refugee crisis, which are partly interconnected, the three speakers, who also included Mekki Elsayed and Tina Coombs, sought to inform the audience of current issues and the need for support and action to reinforce positive change.



Lance Gardiner, UPF South London regional coordinator and MC for the event, opened the proceedings by reading the 100-day countdown message from the UN Secretary General, Ban-Ki Moon, which called on the people of the world to

reaffirm their commitment to living in harmony as members of a single human family. Following this introduction, Narrem Shlash performed a beautiful piano recital of one of Chopin’s famous nocturnes, to provide a serene start to the main programme.

The first speaker presentation was delivered by Tina Coombs, a former UK and European President of UPF’s sister organisation WFP (Women’s Federation for World Peace). She had combined with her husband, her daughter (resident in Cairo) and a Cairo-based journalist, Mr Suzuki, to prepare an enlightening report covering the state of 3 North African nations – Egypt, Tunisia and Libya. After explaining about their reforming programmes, she urged Western governments and people to support the leader of Egypt, El Sisi, and the moderate secular Tobruk government of Libya to encourage stability in the region.

The second talk of the programme was delivered by Anca Anreopoulos, who began by describing the valuable work of the Migrant Help organization in supporting asylum seekers, by assisting them to access health, education, accommodation and translation services. She continued by pronouncing a few facts on asylum applications, mentioning that the number of applications in the UK has declined from approximately 84,000 to 25,000 from 2002 to 2014, a trend contrary to common public perception. She described her encounters with refugees during her recent visit to the Greek island of Kos and shared about the backgrounds of those who struggled to live with dignity in difficult circumstances.

The final speaker, Mekki Elsayed, started by expressing the view that the way to create peace is to welcome people of other religions into our homes and embrace other faiths, following the example of the UPF Founders, Father and Mother Moon. He then presented an overview of the history of his country Sudan, and how his family’s path has been interwoven with recent history. Citing how his own treatment at the hands of the Sudanese authorities was systematic of the failure to establish good governance, he described his humanitarian action in bringing plane loads of medicines from Greece to Sudan at a time of desperate shortage and distributing them through the student unions to ensure that they were not misused by the authorities for commercial profiteering.

Towards the end of the proceedings, the three speakers took questions from the floor, and the exchange with the audience highlighted the need for compassion and understanding of the refugees’ situation but at the same time the importance of tackling the root causes of crises affecting North Africa and the Middle East. As the event drew to a close, the participants enjoyed refreshments with sweet hibiscus tea to the backdrop of lively Sudanese music generously provided by Mr Elsayed.