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TOWARDS PROMOTING A CULTURE OF PEACE

By D.B. Kappagoda

A symposium on facilitating the Asian media to promote a Culture of Peace was held in Manila, bringing together media personnel, scholars and representatives of major religions in the region.

This three day symposium held at Holiday Inn Manila, from December 4 to 6, was organised by the Asian Media Information and Communication Centre, Singapore, in collaboration with the Global Society for Peace and Development, Manila, and was sponsored by the Japan Foundation Asia Centre Tokyo and Regional Communication office for Asia, UNESCO Kuala Lumpur.

The central theme of the deliberations was to examine and develop strategies to promote and perpetuate a culture of peace in Asia. The delegates from: India, Indonesia, Japan, Malaysia, Pakistan, Philippines, Singapore and Sri Lanka participated.

The questions raised at the symposium were: How the media in the selected countries performed in promoting a culture of peace: How can the media be utilized to propagate a culture of peace: What guidelines can be developed for media coverage on conflict: What mechanism can be established for dialogue among Asian institutions to propagate and preserve a culture of peace.

It was the consensus of the participants that print and electronic media have a vital role to play in achieving the above objectives. The media can give a balanced view on violence and strife that crop up in countries from time to time. The underlying issues of the conflicts were brought into focus to understand problems in the correct perspective.

How to promote a culture of peace?
It is important to dispel any misunderstandings among the disputed parties. The correct report of events by the media without sentimentalizing helps to understand the events leading to conflicts. In this context the United Nations declared the year 2000 as the International Year of Peace. Taking a lesson from Sri Lanka, most people want peace after fighting for 17 years causing much destruction to person and property.

The realisation of the futility of the continued hostilities lead the disputed parties to think of restoring peace through negotiations. The majority of the people are now prepared to forget all brutalities committed by the parties who resorted to violent means in achieving their goals. This change of attitude of the warring factions brings relief to those who desire peace. The compassion that the Buddha advocated was the total rejection of hatred and to look at life with a correct understanding. It was this consensus that motivated the political leaders to think afresh on the issues that affect people.

The problem faced by the disputing parties is their inability to resolve conflicts because they do not have a proper idea or plan to work out a solution to their thorny problems. There should be a willingness by the people to set aside animosity and look at things with a better understanding.

Prof. J. B. Dissanayake found the cause for this state of affairs: "The absence of aesthetic sensibilities has a negative impact on an individual's emotional and lack of religious sentiment that cause discord among individuals and communities."

Dr. Sankaran Ramanathan in his address identified one aspect when he said: "Reporting about religion is often pessimistic and derived from a context of misunderstandings, miscommunication and subsequent incorrect perception." He pointed out that media reporting on religion is done with bias and prejudices towards a specific religion or religious group. He stressed, the need that: "the mass media has a direct responsibility to promote positive peace." He saw the media operate within constraints and boundaries, and are faced with problems and difficulties when reporting on peace and religion.

In his opening address Dr. Anura Gunasekera stated: "We see in many countries an increasing penetration of the nation state into the
sphere of mass media, thereby limiting the independence of the media and their critical role.”

Looking broadly at this problem he said: “Most conflicts that took the centre stage in world politics were not between states or countries. They were between people living in the same country. These were civil wars or ethnic or religious wars among the same people.”

Dialogue between cultures is necessary to protect their distinctiveness. This will lead to the recognition of diversity and open the minds of the people to accept unity among people.

In the past, cultural differences were the sources of misunderstanding that led to conflicts. The impact of new communication technology had brought about changes in the lives of the people and helped them to break away from their traditional way of thinking. In the present era of global communication there is up-to-date information available in any part of the world.

It is seen that media is used as tools of propaganda by the government and opposition parties preventing the media being democratised. The workshop was held as part of the symposium, and probed the causes of conflict and they were identified. They are: lack of communication, absence and lack of sympathetic understanding, lack of empathy, lack of initiative and competence in conflict and resolution, maximizing differences rather than similarities, ideological differences and fear of losing self identity.

The media has a positive role to play. This has to be done by educating and creating a favourable climate for achieving a culture of peace. Although a culture of peace is a slow and complex process, the media has a vital role to play.

It is because communication can break barriers and create and promote a culture of peace. The media should make every endeavour to find new and innovative solutions of resolving conflicts within communities and countries through peaceful means.

The message of His Holiness Pope John Paul II for the celebration of the World Day of Peace on January 01, 2001 was timely when he said, that cultural diversity should be understood within the broader horizon of the unity of the human race. The elements of unity
and diversity only makes it possible to understand human aspirations free from control by the state and individuals.

In summing up: In the fast changing world, media should spotlight the issues that affect the people. Governments should actively promote a culture of peace through their policies of effective governance. It is widely accepted now that peace can be achieved by understanding others' grievances. The media only facilitate by creating the necessary atmosphere to achieve peace.