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The Report of

the APA Secretary-General

on

Protecting and Respecting Cultural Diversity in Asia

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Background

In 2006 APA Plenary decided to establish a working group to prepare a Plan of Action for Protecting and Respecting Cultural Diversity in Asia. In 2007, when this Plan of Action was discussed by the APA Executive Council and certain modifications were made, the Plenary adopted the text of the Plan of Action by passing the Resolution APA/Res/2007/02.

In that Resolution, the APA Plenary decided to establish a sub-committee under the Cultural and Social Committee to consider the best ways and means to facilitate the implementation of provisions of the Plan of Action on Cultural Diversity in Asia. The Sub-Committee on Protecting and Respecting Cultural Diversity held its meeting on 21-22 October 2008 in Seoul, Republic of Korea. Delegates from Afghanistan, Bahrain, Cyprus, Korea (Republic of), Kuwait, Jordan, Iran (Islamic Republic of), and Syria participated in the meeting.

Based on the deliberations of its first meeting, the Sub-Committee recommended a draft resolution to the first meeting of the Executive Council in 2008, which was later adopted by the APA Plenary as its resolution APA/Res/2008/17.

APA Plans and Programs for Protecting Cultural Diversity in Asia

A glance at the APA objectives, resolutions, plan of actions, as well as mandates it has set for its subsidiary bodies in protecting and respecting cultural diversity in Asia, indicates that the Assembly has adopted a visionary

approach in this respect on one hand, and has undertaken an ambitious scope of activities for materializing that vision on the other.

The APA vision on promoting and protecting cultural diversity in Asia, as reflected in the relevant documents, is based, *inter alia*, on the following principles:

- the principles enshrined in the APA Charter;
- recognition of the significant role of parliaments both in strengthening national cultural policies and in harmonizing Asian approach for protecting and respecting cultural diversity;
- the fact that Asia has been the cradle of the great religions, ancient civilizations and rich cultures;
- recognition of cultural diversity as an inevitable reality relating to the past and the future of human civilizations and the fundamental idea that long-lasting peace depends on respect for cultural and value systems of different communities;
- firm belief in that humanity enjoys a unified and essential nature, and cultural diversity helps to bring about creativity, innovation, and sustainable development;
- recognizing that cultural diversity provides the ground for constructive interactions among different cultures and facilitates their mutual enrichment;
- acknowledging that dialogue and understanding among cultures and religions will foster Asian common values and enhance cooperation, peace and friendship while diminishing the risks of discrimination, violence, and war;
- recognizing that in the new world situation, cultural diversity continues to illustrate the strength of Asia despite the fact that globalization has brought challenges in regard to cultural identities;

- respecting cultural rights as integral parts of human rights, with due consideration of national, historical and cultural characteristics of each Asian nation.

On the other hand, the scope of activities as reflected in the APA Plan of Action on Cultural Diversity, and the APA Resolutions APA/Res/2007/02 and APA/Res/2008/17 cover a wide range of mandates and actions including:

- formulation of policies and strategies to protect and respect cultural diversity at both regional and continental levels;
- facilitating cooperation and integration among Asian nations, cultures and religions through educational and cultural exchanges and developing school curricula in promotion of national and cultural identities;
- promoting the adoption of a common legislation among Member Parliaments to combat smuggling of cultural items in Asia,
- encouraging media, research and educational institutions to establish cultural “chairs” in universities and granting scholarships for comparative studies on Asian cultures organizing conferences, seminars and workshops to enhance dialogue and understanding;
- utilizing the capacity of inter-governmental (IGOs) and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) as well as big economic institutions in supporting cultural diversity and dialogue;
- further utilizing of information technology and variety of cultural capacities in economic development and expansion of tourism in Asia;
- protecting Asian cultural heritage and combating smuggling and illicit traffic of cultural items;
- exchanging relevant information, best practices and joint programs in Asia, including through identification of focal points in the executive branch of each Member Parliament and defining a networking scheme among them;

- strengthening coordination between APA and international and regional organizations such as UNESCO, ISESCO and relevant NGOs active in this field;
- holding two regional workshops in 2009 to study the most appropriate relationship between economic development and culture, and to promote interfaith dialogue among Asian religions;
- establishing an award to be presented annually to an Asian artist; author, poet, film maker, painter, etc, who best conveys the APA message of Asian cooperation and integration;
- establishing an Asian Cultural Foundation (ACF) as a non-governmental organization to strengthen coordination of cultural activities at the continent level;
- supporting the production of short movies about the role of Asia in human civilization and the significance of Asian integration;
- holding Asian cultural festivals in music, theater and so on;

APA Progress and Performance: An Assessment

Since the adoption of APA Plan of Action on Cultural Diversity a number of admirable actions have taken place. For instance, the APA Secretariat has held an annual competition award for the best movie in Asia that supports Asian integration. Last year this award was granted to Vietnamese's Director "Bui Thac Chuyen" for directing "Living in Fear". This year, the second prize went to Director "Abolhassan Davoodi" from Iran for his outstanding movie entitled "Zadboom" (mother land).

Furthermore, the Secretariat is planning to announce an essay contest throughout Asia for students and young scholars on the concept of Asian integration and the role of APA in that process. Thanks to the generosity of the Islamic Consultative Assembly of the Islamic Republic of Iran in allocating US\$20,000 to this initiative, the APA will award 100 of the participants in the contest between \$ 100 – 500.

Despite these remarkable actions, the long list of activities on the APA Plan of Action on Cultural Diversity is yet to materialize. In fulfilling its mandate to report to this sub-committee on the efforts by the Member Parliaments to implement the APA resolutions APA/Res/2007/02 and APA/Res/2008/17, the Secretary-General feels obliged to indicate that as of now, the response from Member Parliaments has been less than encouraging. A number of innovative ideas, incorporated in the APA relevant resolutions which can highly contribute to the promotion and protection of cultural diversity, await common resolve and concerted efforts by the APA Member Parliaments to be realized. What is needed, thus, is rather concerted efforts and coordinated actions by the APA Member Parliaments with regard to the implementation of respective resolutions and the Plan of Action on Cultural Diversity in Asia.

Taking into account the feasibility of the proposals on the APA agenda in this respect, and practical requirements needed for the implementation of the APA Plan of Action on Cultural Diversity, the Secretary-General is of the view that the activities mandated by the APA Plenary have to be reorganized in three different but concurrent stages:

In the first stage, the APA should give priority to actions which are more likely to bear tangible results within its organizational domain. This would certainly include embarking on the common legislation on combating the smuggling of cultural items in Asia. In the second stage, priority should be given to actions which would require the involvement of other parties including governmental and non-governmental organizations in and outside Asia. This would particularly include international organizations like UNESCO, ISESCO, ASEAN. In the third stage, actions should be directed towards the public through mass media furthering the involvement of interested individuals including cultural dignitaries, scholars, artists, and the like. This would cover a variety of initiatives enlisted in the APA Plan of Actions on Cultural Diversity.

If this strategy is adopted by this sub-committee and later by the APA Plenary, then the Secretary-General would find it appropriate to suggest the following topics to be focused on and given priority in the APA short-term agenda relating to the issue of protection of cultural diversity in Asia:

- 1. Common Legislation on Combating the Smuggling of Cultural Items**

Embracing the most ancient civilizations of the world, Asia is in dire need to preserve and protect its collective cultural heritage. The smuggling of cultural items is a plague that damages the cultural integrity of Asia. To combat such anti-cultural phenomenon requires close cooperation among all Asian countries. Transparent laws and regulations for protecting cultural items constitute a basic and important aspect of this campaign.

As an Assembly of law-making and legislative body, the APA is in a proper position to take certain steps in order to remove legal loopholes in trafficking cultural items across the Asia. A practical and effective measure towards this goal would require the adoption of a model-legislation on combating the smuggling of cultural items. Once the APA reaches a consensus in this respect, national parliaments in Asia would be encouraged to consider passing the common legislation in accordance with their own internal procedures. One can be hopeful that such a coordinated campaign in the long run, would prove as an outstanding accomplishment in the course of APA endeavor towards further integration in Asia.

Secretary-General suggestion is to establish an ad-hoc committee with at least 3 principal member to prepare draft common legislation on combating the smuggling of cultural items and report to Secretariat.

2. Asian Cultural Foundation as a Network of Cultural Cooperation

A review of the topics and issue-areas reflected in the APA Plan of Action on Cultural Diversity indicates that the APA Member Parliaments are more interested to maintain for the Assembly guiding and promoting functions in the short run, and facilitating as well as legislative functions in the long run. Such functions are quite compatible with the capacities and mandates of the APA mainly because the APA and its Member Parliaments do not possess executive power to get directly involved in the implementation of programs in support of cultural diversity in Asia.

Accordingly when the APA Plenary approved the mandate of establishing an Asian Cultural Foundation (ACF) it was understood that the main function of this foundation would be "to strengthen coordination of cultural activities at the continent level." In the context of the APA Plan of Action on Cultural Diversity, this mandate could be fulfilled through encouraging and facilitating

educational and research programs; cultural exchanges; media and artistic activities; and by utilizing the capacity of inter-governmental (IGOs) and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) as well as big economic institutions in supporting cultural diversity and dialogue.

Therefore, for the purpose of assuming an effective role in guiding, promoting and even coordinating cultural activities in Asia, it seems appropriate for the APA that instead of undertaking the establishment of an Asian Cultural Foundation which would inevitably involve executive and managerial engagements, to rather direct the course of its activities towards capacity building and networking among active cultural foundations in Asia with the participation of Asian prominent cultural figures and institutions.

While capacity building and networking strategy may cover a wide range of cultural, educational, artistic, and religious initiatives, the Secretary-General is of the opinion that investing in Asia's capacity in the field of art in general, and in the movie industry in particular, would be the most rewarding. With a gradual and incremental strategy, the APA can build on the spill-over effects of movie industry into other areas of cultural diversity such as literature; tourism; music; architecture; and the like.

Needless to say that capacity building for such a networking in the vast domain of Asian cultural diversity would require the inputs and active participation of all APA Member Parliaments in general, and the Members of this sub-committee in particular, in formulating its vision and mission statements, long and short term goals, as well as terms of reference and methods of conduct for the APA involvement in the network.

Secretary – General suggestion is to establish 2 ad – hoc working group with at least 3 principal member to pioneer this initiative in 2 different fields such as movie industry and tourism.