



The Beacon for Freedom of Expression Conference 2004

The Beacon for Freedom of Expression Database A Gift from Norway to the Bibliotheca Alexandrina

Alexandria-- The Norwegian Ministry of Culture and Church Affairs has donated a unique gift to the **Bibliotheca Alexandrina** represented in a database entitled The Beacon of Freedom of Expression at a Conference organized by the BA today. In presenting the gift, the Norwegian Minister of Culture Ms. Valgerd Svarstad Haugland summed up the idea of the database and the way it is organized. She said the first part contains more than 55,000 bibliographical references and the second lists literature on censorship on freedom of expression. Ms. Haugland referred to article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights which states that, "Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive, and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers". She also confirmed that after the handing over of the database to the BA, a follow-up by an International Steering Committee, financed by the Norwegian Ministry of Culture and Church Affairs has been ensured until the end of 2005. Dr. Ismail Serageldin Director of the Bibliotheca Alexandrina welcomed the gift and the donors and thanked the Norwegian Minister for choosing the BA to "be the depositor of this great project".

In her speech, the Norwegian Minister welcomed the guests and mentioned the merits of the city of Alexandria referring to some of the historical events that have accompanied the construction of "this great city". She gave a glimpse into how the ancient library once stood at the city that housed the famous lighthouse of Pharos and how they were both destroyed some 1600 years ago. She then quoted an excerpt of Law no. 1 for the year 2001 that H.E. President Mubarak had issued to give a special status to the new Library of Alexandria and emphasized how this law concentrated on the fact that the BA will be "an Egyptian center for cultural radiance, a beacon for thought, culture and science, to encompass the product of the human mind in cultures old and new in all languages".

The Minister added that the three important principles that make up a strong line of reasoning for the universality of the principle of freedom of expression are truth, autonomy and democracy. These three principles condition each other and provide a universal justification for the freedom of expression. She quoted the leading Norwegian Poet Ludvig Holberg "the more cultivation a people possess, the more freedom they grant their poets" and the French Poet Voltaire, "I disagree with all you say but are willing to die for your right to say it". She stressed the fact that all people should respect the right of the others to express their own opinions and to accept the opinions of the others.

The Minister announced that during the state visit of Their Majesties King Harald the 5th and Queen Sonja of Norway to the Kingdom of Belgium, which is scheduled to start on May 20th 2003, Their Majesties will open an exposition dedicated to the Bibliotheca Alexandrina at the Royal Library of Brussels. A copy of the database will be presented as a symbolic gift to the Royal Library. She sent a message of gratitude to H.E. Mrs. Suzanne Mubarak, Chair of the Board of Trustees of the BA, for her invaluable efforts towards the Library. Ms. Haugland also



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thanked Dr. Ismail Serageldin for his appreciation of the donated database and for the efforts of the BA staff. She also extended her thanks to all the institutions that were involved in the project such as, the International Freedom of Expression eXchange Clearing House (IFEX), the International Federation of Library Associations (IFLA), UNESCO, the United Nations Library in Geneva, Mr. Ravn Webveveriet, the web-designer of the database, the former Norwegian Forum for Freedom of Expression, the Norwegian Library Association, the Institute of Human Rights at the University of Oslo, the Faculty of Journalism, Library and Information Science at Oslo University Collage, the National Library of Norway, Mrs. Mette Newth, the project coordinator and all other International organizations and national libraries that have contributed to this unique project. The Norwegian Minister demonstrated how the database works on a projection screen.

In his speech, the Director of the Library Dr. Ismail Serageldin expressed his deep gratitude for the donation of the Norwegian government and for all the efforts that were exerted by the Norwegian team to ensure that this valuable project is delivered in its final version to the BA. He gave a brief introduction on the ancient Library of Alexandria saying that it has always been the meeting point of the interactive dialogues of humanity's greatest achievements. He then summed up the role of the new Library of Alexandria as set by the distinguished International Board of Trustees that the Library will aspire to be the world's window on Egypt ; Egypt 's window on the world, a leading institution of the digital age, and above all; a center for learning, tolerance and understanding. That is where the relevance of such donations lies and as he said "that is indeed the spot where we should meet to launch the Beacon of Freedom project, to reclaim for the New Library of Alexandria some of the luster and the role of its ancestors."

Dr. Serageldin added that the new complex is much more than a library as it contains specialized libraries, museums, art galleries, exhibitions, a planetarium, a conference center and five research institutes. He also referred to the enormous efforts that Egypt committed itself to and to the support that this great project has received from many governments, organizations, institutions, friends associations as well as individuals. Quoting the words of Dr. Serageldin, "Freedom of Expression has always been an issue of debate even in the golden age of ancient Greece and the last few millennia have been one long struggle for acceptance of human rights, of expanding the scope for freedom of choice and of action", the examples that were presented throughout his speech proved that it is a global issue that is not limited to any boundaries or countries in particular. He also referred to the names of some works and publications that have been banned in Egypt for moral or religious reasons such as the book of Haidar Haidar (Feast of the Seaweed) and the book of Maxime Rodinson on Prophet Muhammad. He also gave reference to some examples of oppression of freedom of expression in different parts of the United States of America .

He reiterated the importance of the role that is played by libraries focusing on the role of the BA in making available of the material that was banned in different societies and cultures throughout the different eras through the database of the Beacon of the Freedom of Expression. The issue of censorship in the Egyptian society is not only due to the government actions or the legislations but in reality lies in the society and the individuals and that is why the



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BA is committed to help create this space of freedom for dialogue between individuals, cultures and civilizations. To round up the speech, Dr. Serageldin expressed his happiness that the BA is proud to house this unique project and quoted the words of Gandhi engraved under his bust in the Library "I do not want my windows to be stuffed. I want all the cultures of the world to blow about my house freely, but I refuse to be blown off my feet by any.."

Bishop Desmond Tutu, South Africa Nobel Peace Prize Laureate joined the opening session of the conference via videoconference where he saluted all the people that were gathered during the centennial ceremony of the Nobel Peace Prize Laureates that was held in Oslo 2001 confirming that the Universe is moral and that injustice and oppression will never have the final word. He also urged the attendants of that ceremony to join him to become winners together and to stand there to say to Aung San Suu Kyi, Burmese Nobel Peace Prize Laureate, that the world will be a better place and that one day they will be able to free Burma (Myanmar) as they freed South Africa . Finally Bishop Tutu said that goodness and freedom would not happen until the whole world is freed wishing that God would bless all those who have attended this ceremony.

Ms. Aung San Suu Kyi, Burmese Nobel Peace Prize Laureate also joined the opening session via videoconference and stated that many of her people have suffered from oppression but that will not stop them from continuing with strength in all possible abilities of the human race to free Myanmar. She also confirmed that humanity is capable of progress and that they will one day overcome all injustices by calling upon all the friends in the world to help them free their country. Ms. Kyi mentioned the fact that Burma has a bad government and that all the people of the world must stand together to bring peace to this part of the world where democracy should come first and where practical help and international cooperation should take real steps towards achieving justice because the longer it takes the worse it will become. The people of Burma want democracy and they also want the world to recognize their right of attaining democracy is a basic human right. She finally called upon all the friends to help them in their struggle.

Following these two messages of Bishop Tutu and Ms. Kyi, Dr. Serageldin called upon the famous Egyptian Poet Mr. Ahmed Abd El-Mooti Hegazy to give a quick glimpse of his own personal experience with poetry and the impact of censorship on artists. Mr. Hegazy thanked the BA for giving him this opportunity to speak about freedom of expression and the effect of censorship on books, writers, and thinkers especially those who have been oppressed and sometimes even imprisoned. He gave examples of how his courage in dedicating many issues of his well-known publication (Ibdaa Magazine - "Creativity") to defend the Algerian writers, journalists and thinkers who have been adversely affected by oppression to the extent that some of them were killed because of their desire to express their views freely. He added that he has also dedicated one of his magazine issues to defend Nasr Hamed Abou Zeid, Naguib Mahfouz, Farag Fouda and many others. Mr. Hegazy gave many examples of oppression in the modern age such as cases that took place in Iran , Jordan and many other parts of the world. He then gave the example of his early poetry, which was banned due to misinterpretation as well as other examples of having his publication banned due to misunderstanding by some religious zealots. He referred to old Arabic poetry and its



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importance in the Bedouin life as their only means of communication and proved that the issue of the freedom of expression goes back to the early days of the Arabs and that it is an unending universal battle.

The last part of the opening session was a brief presentation by Mr. Gere Andarssen, Deputy Director, Worldview Rights on the exhibition "Art for Freedom" which is consisting of 17 unique graphic works by Norway 's leading contemporary Artists. This art compilation was given to the Media and Human Rights Organization Worldview Rights in 1994. Since then, Art for Freedom has been offered to Nobel Peace Prize Laureates including Aung San Suu Kyi, Kofi Annan, H.H. the Dalai Lama, Jose Ramos-Horta and Bishop Belo. There were only 250 copies produced of the folder, each individually numbered and signed by the Artists. Revenues from selling the art folder provide financial support to the Nobel Peace Prize Follow-Up Fund, led by Worldview Rights.

The opening session was followed by a Press Conference where many of the Egyptian and international media representatives directed their questions to the Norwegian Minister, Dr. Serageldin and Mr. Hegazy about the content of the database, the idea behind this unique project and their future expectations of this initiative.