

Statement by Mr. Tayé-Brook Zerihoun
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UNFICYP

The Role of Civil Society in Supporting the Peace and Reconciliation Process
Fulbright Center, Nicosia, 7 July 2009

Ladies and Gentlemen, Friends and Colleagues,

I appreciate this opportunity to speak briefly to you today on a subject of great interest and importance to the United Nations family here in Cyprus and indeed to the UN in general.

The subject under discussion is of particular relevance today because of the fundamental contribution civil society can, and should, make to the efforts afoot to reunify Cyprus. An involved, informed and energized civil society is desirable in and of itself in any country. The rise of civil society organizations has been a landmark event and they have become prime movers of some of the most innovative initiatives to deal with conflicts and emerging threats.

In the case of Cyprus, civil society is also an essential vehicle for building trust between the communities, garnering support for a solution and creating an environment that is conducive to moving the peace process forward. As an independent voice in support of peace and reconciliation, you have a unique ability to step outside the role of protagonist and offer candid suggestions, and where warranted, candid warnings.

Civil society in this country is generally perceived not to be as well developed as in other European countries. There are specific conditions and circumstances in Cyprus that help explain this situation, not least the continuing division of the island. The development of civil society in the country has been largely defined, like virtually all other Cypriot institutions, by the division of the island and its two main communities. One still cannot speak of a single "Cypriot civil society". What is most important, however, is that despite many difficulties, the "civil societies" on both sides have persevered in their commitment to work together to foster trust and understanding between the communities and help achieve peace and reconciliation.

Indeed, civil society groups have at various times in the past few decades provided the only channels for communication and contact between Greek and Turkish Cypriots. Today, happily, we face a different situation: there is a reinvigorated peace process, bi-communal contact is no longer the exception and

it has become much easier for Cypriots today to move around the island. And yet, among Cypriots from north and south, hopes and expectations of a comprehensive settlement are strikingly low. It is in this area that I believe civil society support can be instrumental to the success of the peace process. Civil society organizations can help communicate to people on both sides the potential benefits of a comprehensive solution to the Cyprus problem. And once, as we all hope and expect, a settlement is achieved, active participation of civil society groups will be essential to making it sustainable.

I know that in saying this I am preaching to the converted. Civil society groups are keen to contribute to the peace process, and this event is further evidence of that desire. It is also evident and, may I say understandable, that the direct talks do not as yet envisage an active role for civil society. But there ought to be soon a more concerted effort to foster support for the process among the public on both sides. That need not wait for a signal from the parties to begin. Your proximity to the people, the capital of trust you have accumulated and the networks you have nurtured across the divide are invaluable tools in any initiative to complement and buttress the peace process. The work of peace is a work of partnership that must engage everyone. It is often argued, is it not, that peace is too important to be left to politicians.

There are no universal recipes or fail-proof prescriptions for the work you propose to do to help bring about peace and reconciliation. But there are experiences from around the world to draw on. Your work during this crucial stage of the peace process will be challenging, but also equally rewarding. We at the United Nations will follow it with great interest and provide all the support we can. You can rest assured about that.

Thank you.