



Gandhi voyage of dialogue and discovery



Rajmohan Gandhi with Dr Barghouthi in Hebron

his philosophy.' The group took time to listen and learn from the country's rich past – a story of divisions, exploitation and suffering, but also of great courage, patience and heroism. Gandhi noted that although people may 'no longer be separated by law, they are often still separated by location, circumstance and fear'. Addressing the University of Cape Town he said that 'more often than not, the blame for the world's troubles is pinned on one group or another, as is happening with Muslims around the world.' However, he argued, 'there is no such thing as a flawed group of people'. Instead it is hate, fear and greed that divide people. Only a 'coalition of conscience' and a 'deeper connectivity' would overcome these divides.

Professor Rajmohan Gandhi, President of Initiatives of Change International, and his wife Usha, are currently undertaking a five-month 'voyage of dialogue and discovery' to 14 nations, accompanied by a team of mostly young IofC activists from Australia, Lebanon, Mexico, the UK and USA. 'In the face of enormous environmental, economic and social challenges, how can we all begin to address the divisions that get in the way of effective responses?' said Professor Gandhi, 'Can we find the time, energy, and humility needed to build trust across the divides around us? We don't come with simple answers but with a hope for honest dialogue and a desire for collaboration.'

Their first visit was to Indonesia, home to the world's largest Muslim population. As a grandson of the Mahatma, Gandhi acknowledged that the Muslim-Hindu relationship was of particular interest to him. Speaking at the Gandhi Memorial School he recalled his experience of multi-faith prayer meetings with the Mahatma as a young boy. Occasionally some Hindus would angrily object to the reciting of Koranic verse. If persuasion failed, his grandfather would accept their demand, but would then refuse to recite from Hindu scriptures, moving directly instead to general remarks. It was a lesson in making space for the other. In meetings with representatives of Nahdlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah, the country's two largest Muslim organizations (with 60 million members between them) and interviews in two of the main newspapers, Gandhi emphasized the importance of genuine listening – both to each other and also in silent reflection for a deeper wisdom. The root causes of injustice, division and conflict, he said, are the 'steamroller of greed', along with 'fear and hate'. What was important was 'a determination to combat these things within ourselves'.

South Africa, the next port of call, was also 'very special to me', said Gandhi, interviewed in the SA *Sunday Times*, 'since it is here that my grandfather had the experiences – the reflection, the reading, the discussions – that helped him form

Key to all of this is leadership. In universities, schools, and the new 'Africa Leadership Academy' whose mission is to 'transform Africa into a peaceful and prosperous continent by developing and supporting its future leaders', Gandhi challenged audiences to honestly ask themselves, 'Who are my people?' and to 'remember that the millions of other young Africans who are not here are as important as you are.' Linked with this was the question posed by Bishop Dandala in a meeting with the Gandhi group: 'how to remain incorruptible, once we have the power not to be?' Dandala, who is parliamentary leader of the Congress of the People party, is adamant that 'we cannot ignore the centrality of morality in nation-building'.

Visits to some of the world's largest slums around Nairobi, Kenya and Cairo, Egypt, underlined the huge economic divides, while Kenya's 42 different ethnic groups and history of tribal conflict showed another level of division. As in other countries, the local IofC team is working to build bridges of trust. Ann Njeri, a young Kenyan of the Kikuyu tribe spoke of her personal



The Gandhis met with Kenyan Vice President Kalonzo Musyoka (centre) and had an earlier meeting with Prime Minister Raila Odinga.

journey of reconciliation, starting by recognizing the bitterness she harboured towards Kalenjins and apologizing. Visits to their communities and inviting Kalenjins into her family home brought warm friendships. In Eldoret, epicentre of post-election violence, Imam Ashafa and Pastor James Wuye have brought their peace-building process from Nigeria, hosted by IofC.

In Palestine, the divisions manifest themselves in a vast network of walls and fences. Dr Barghouthi, a Nobel Peace Prize nominee who heads the Palestinian National Initiative, gave the Gandhis a tour of the West Bank to see the impact of Israeli settlements on the local population. 'The settlements, walls and separating roads loom larger and more oppressively than I had imagined,' Gandhi told a press conference the next day. However, 'the range of Palestinian non-violent activity against occupation is also larger, and richer in creativity than I had imagined.' The growing Palestinian movement for non-violent resistance was the subject

of major articles in the *New York Times* and the BBC news online, both of which reported on Gandhi's visit. In speeches Gandhi returned repeatedly to the subject of justice. 'I become smaller in my own eyes if I don't fight for justice. Also I will meet my Maker one day, who will want to know whether or not I raised my voice for justice.' Acknowledging the sense of justice inherent in Judaism, Gandhi called for a rousing of Judaism's conscience, and paid tribute to 'the many in Israel and the many Americans of Jewish origin who fight for Palestinian rights'. Meeting President Shimon Peres at his home in Jerusalem, Professor Gandhi told him, 'The recovery after the Holocaust of the Jewish people is one of the noblest, most stirring chapters in the story of humankind. I pray for another chapter in this story, a chapter where justice is provided to the Palestinians.'

The Gandhi Voyage has continued through Norway, Romania and Ukraine. For further updates, see www.iofc.org/gandhi-tour

News in Brief

Tools for Change, Kuala Lumpur

The second annual Tools for Change KL took place in March, organized by PICCSO (Performance Improvement Centre for Civil Society Organizations), a programme of IofC Malaysia. The 80 attending came from NGOs and IofC teams in Malaysia, Philippines, Vietnam, Indonesia and Australia. The programme ranged from brainstorming round critical issues in the world to plenaries presenting initiatives in violence-racked Mindanao and the North-East of India; from reflective early morning quiet times to a noisy evening of hilarious entertainment. Afternoons were devoted to nine workshops delivering high-quality training in areas such as 'Bulls-Eye presentations' and 'Core values and leadership challenges across cultures'.

Trustbuilding book launched in Richmond

Governor Tim Kaine, who chairs the Democratic National Committee in the USA, launched a book on *Trustbuilding: an honest conversation on race, reconciliation and responsibility*, in

the Library of Virginia, on 15 March. The book, written by Rob Corcoran, founder of IofC's Hope in the Cities programme, tells how Richmond, a city starkly divided by a history of slavery and racism, has modelled approaches to facilitating honest and inclusive dialogue and building diverse partnerships. More than 100 community leaders, including representatives of local and state government, business and non-profit organizations, attended the event. 'Hope in the Cities focuses on the "still small voice", not loud and flashy approaches, or neon signs,' said Kaine. 'Listening is a lost art in this world. Hope in the Cities is creating a space where people can talk.'



Governor Tim Kaine at the Trustbuilding book launch

CALENDAR

BWEYOGERERE, UGANDA

4-9 May

East Africa Farmers' Dialogue

NAKURU, KENYA

12-16 May

'Africa, Do I Care?' Conference

SITIO SÃO LUIZ, BRAZIL

28-30 May

Youth Changing Lives programme

CAUX, SWITZERLAND

Caux Conferences

see www.caux.ch/2010

2-7 July

Learning to Live in a Multicultural World

9-16 July

Caux Forum for Human Security

26 July-2 August

Everybody Counts

4-10 August

Leading Change for a Sustainable World

4-10 August

IofC training courses

12-17 August

Trust and Integrity in the Global Economy

KUALA LUMPUR, MALAYSIA

28 July-2 August

Asia Pacific Youth Conference

PANCHGANI, INDIA

1 November-30 March

Action for Life 5

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Building trust across the world's divides

Initiatives of Change

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Wadiaa Khoury

PEOPLE BUILDING TRUST

Refusing to be turned into monsters
Could Lebanon's 18 different communities find a common history to teach future generations? One young educator believes they can. Interviewed by Carole Khakula for this story compiled by Mike Brown.

It was during a visit to Robben Island where Nelson Mandela was imprisoned for 18 years that Wadiaa Khoury was confronted by her reactions as a Lebanese. She was in South Africa as one of the team accompanying Rajmohan Gandhi, President of Initiatives of Change International, on a 14-nation tour. Reflecting afterwards on her sarcastic comment about the presentation of a guide – who turned out to be an ex-prisoner – made her very uncomfortable.

It took her back two years, when an Iraqi delegation to Beirut showed a movie about terrorist attacks in Baghdad. It was supposed to make the hardest heart cry. But the reaction of some of her Lebanese friends was: 'Now they know what we went through during our 1975-1990 war when their consciences were on vacation... so why should we sympathize with them now?'

'Is it an accumulation of unhealed pain that causes us to become that stone-hearted?'

'Is it an accumulation of unhealed pain that causes us to become that stone-hearted?' Khoury asked herself. 'Years of conflicts, topped by the July 2006 war on Lebanon, have hardened my feelings. I need to face this repelling truth and then engage on a journey of

inner healing, both for my sake and for the sake of those similarly contaminated.'

In fact, for the past eight years, 30-year-old Khoury has been building her commitment to healing in her war-scarred country. It is why she works as Community Service Coordinator at the International College in Beirut, taking 600 students through a civics programme that crosses the divides of religious and communal conflict. It is why she – from a conservative Catholic background in a quiet farming valley – chose to study in a Muslim campus. And to study law, because Lebanese law – which protects the rights of each of 18 religious confessions to have its own institutions, laws of heritage, marriage and divorce – is itself divisive.

Last year, she joined workshops editing two books on the history of religions of the Middle East and Lebanon. 'Our ambition is to help rewrite one agreed Lebanese history, to establish a common curriculum for teaching history and civics.'

That commitment was seeded eight years ago in India. Khoury's mother had been part of a Christian-Muslim dialogue, run by IofC, involving former militia leaders from the 15-year civil war. Feeling she had to understand those beyond her limited Christian circle, Khoury applied for a year in Asia with IofC's 'Action for Life' programme. 'It was the biggest turning point in looking at myself from a third dimension.'



For a start, the changes were personal and not very easy. She realized that many of her relationships reflected her lack of a meaningful father-daughter relationship. 'My father is moral and honest, a great man indeed, but cannot connect well as he has serious hearing problems. In addition, he does not come from an emotionally expressive family.' After two months of prevaricating, she wrote her father telling him for the first time how much she loved him, and acknowledging his patience through his frustrating hearing problem.

It created 'an awakening moment' in relationships with the whole family. But also, she found, with Muslim students she had encountered at university. 'I had experienced the same frustration with them as with my father: I could not communicate my feelings and have them understand. It was like speaking to a wall. However, when the wall was broken with my father, it was easier for it to be broken with Muslims.'

'The real battle resides in refusing to be turned into monsters ourselves'

Resolving to use her career to create a different story for Lebanon, she turned down a tempting offer to study in France, and instead studied Law at the Muslim majority campus of the Lebanese University in Beirut. One of only three Christians among 1,300 Muslim students, she discovered 'the new strength that writing that letter (to my father) had given me. For four years I learnt the Muslim thinking, understood their and my own prejudices.'

She noted that prejudice was passed on to students even by some of the lecturers. 'Innocent students in their freshman year were slowly corrupted, becoming fanatics by their final year.' However, with her small group of friends, she recognized 'a thirst for truth. We asked each other very deep questions, had many honest conversations including during the most difficult times, like after the 2005 killing of Prime Minister Hariri, and the 2006 war on Lebanon.'

Days after that war ended, she went with those students to see buildings surrounding their University in Beirut demolished by Israeli bombs. But the most searing trauma came through the death of a friend from her home town of Zahle. Michael Jbaily, as part of the Zahle Red Cross team, was accompanying a large convoy of cars fleeing the fighting between Israeli and Hezbollah forces. Though the exodus was negotiated with Israeli and UN officers, it was attacked en route by Israeli MK drones. Rushing to rescue a badly injured man, Jbaily was killed by yet another MK missile.

For two months Khoury could not cry: not at the viewing of his body, nor at his funeral with his wife and young family. Though she prayed, 'Please help

me because I am torturing myself', the fury was shut up within her bones. On the first anniversary of his death, she wrote: 'I know that no matter how much I am angry, loved ones will not come back and destroyed places will not build themselves. The worst thing would be to complete the destruction of what Israel missed in summer.' As a Lebanese psychologist said at that time: 'The real battle resides in refusing to be turned into monsters ourselves.' Months later, after wrestling with herself late one night in prayer and then being greeted unexpectedly by Michael's brother in a street next morning, she broke and wept for hours. She understands his death as a pure sacrifice for the resurrected peace that came three days later.

In South Africa she reflected on her experiences. 'In my region taking sides is almost an obligation. And inside Lebanon, one's confession almost constantly imposes a political affiliation. But in South Africa, maybe for the first time, I find it absolutely impossible to take sides. There are a number of equally great and wounded communities on all sides. I cannot miss seeing the tremendous effect the different communities have had on each other. How can I help people in South Africa value their diversity, far more than the gold of their land?'

'Maybe that's all meant to remind me of the richness that has resulted from the Christian-Muslim coexistence in Lebanon: from the maintenance of both freedom of expression and a spiritual life, in each community and in the country as a whole.'

Asked what she prays for, she replies it is that 'people of good will, who are the vast majority of Lebanon, will see their work flourish. There has been a tremendous work of dialogue and reconciliation going on; and our IofC group are a small part of it. I pray that our work will prevail for the stability of our country, and that it will be enough for the Lebanese to forbid the Middle East's condition from imposing itself on Lebanon. Even though we are a small country and face the repercussions of what happens around us, we can be a torch in this dark region if only we are faithful enough.'



Wadiaa Khoury (centre) in South Africa