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Culture: 'Understanding Diversity Can Help Avoid Clashes'

Analysis by A.D. McKenzie (paris) | Friday, January 15, 2010 Inter Press Service

The International Year for the Rapprochement of Cultures (2010) has not had an auspicious start.

Since the year began, the world has seen increased border security and heightened mistrust following a botched attempt by a Nigerian Muslim to bring down a United States-bound airliner.

Violent clashes have also occurred between African migrants and Italian locals in southern Italy. Churches in Malaysia have been firebombed and vandalised over the disputed use of the word 'Allah'. And a Somali immigrant allegedly tried to kill a Danish cartoonist in the never-ending saga that began with the publication of caricatures of the Prophet Mohammad in 2005.

Yet the United Nations-designated year is an ambitious scheme to create better understanding between diverse groups and to have cultural and inter-religious dialogue as an essential part of national and international policies.

'The main objective of the Year is to demonstrate the real benefits of cultural diversity and to stress the important links between cultures, both things at the same time,' Dr. Katerina Stenou, director of UNESCO's division of cultural policies and intercultural dialogue, told IPS in an interview. 'This could be the major contribution, in my eyes.'

The U.N.'s cultural organisation, whose secretariat is based here, is set to play a leading role throughout the Year, and Stenou says it wants to 'put under the lens' all policy and political decisions regarding cultural diversity.

Member states in 2005 adopted a Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions but many countries still regard groups that are so-called cultural minorities as a threat. Some of these groups face systematic discrimination and oppression.

'We have to understand and cherish diversity, while also having a public place to celebrate our common values of responsibility, trust, solidarity,' Stenou told IPS, adding that she was deeply concerned that religious differences were being used as a 'fuel' to increase tensions and that there is so much focus on this.

Stenou said the Year would see a wide range of activities because cultures comprise 'not only arts and letters, but also ways of life, means of living together, value systems, traditions and beliefs.'

One emphasis will be on education and providing better access and facilities for marginalised groups. According to UNESCO, a majority of the 75 million children who did not go to school in 2006 (55 percent of whom were girls) were from cultural 'minorities', indigenous populations or nomads.

That figure could increase as the 'aftershock of the global financial crisis threatens to deprive millions of children in the world's poorest countries of an education,' says Kevin Watkins, the director of a report which will be launched next week at UN headquarters in New York.

Watkins says that governments need to 'act decisively' to avert that risk. Stenou adds: 'We need to improve access to both formal and informal education, with particular stress on quality education for everyone, and education about human rights and cultural diversity.'

Countries around the world have already proposed some 300 projects to create rapprochement, or closer contact, between groups. Burundi, which has long experienced a series of brutal conflicts between its Tutsi and Hutu populations, has launched a campaign for national reconciliation and peace-building, for instance, while China will have a 'meet in Beijing' arts festival that will feature groups from other hemispheres.

In May, Brazil plans to host a forum of The Alliance of Civilisations, a U.N. initiative that grew out of a proposal by

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Spain and Turkey and which aims to combat extremism and to 'reduce tensions across cultural divides', particularly between the Islamic world and the West.

'Let us address the world's imbalances, bridge the divides and develop a new mindset of understanding and engagement among diverse communities,' Jorge Sampaio, Portugal's former president and the Alliance's High Representative, said earlier this month.

France, which is embroiled in a government-sponsored debate on national identity, is insisting that all Year-related actions 'respond strictly' to respect for human rights, a position being taken by other European Union member states.

From a business point of view, UNESCO says that companies investing in cultural diversity can see economic benefits.

According to the organisation's World Report on Investing in Cultural Diversity and Intercultural Dialogue, media and cultural industries represent more than 7 percent of global GDP, accounting for some 1.3 trillion US dollars, or about twice the income from international tourism, which is estimated at 680 billion dollars.

The report says, however, that some regions are not able to share in this commercial benefit; Africa's share of 'global trade in creative products remains marginal - at less than one percent of worldwide exports - despite its abundance of creative talent,' UNESCO says.

To improve this situation, investment in cultural diversity and dialogue is urgent, says the organisation.

But this won't be so easy, according to some culture experts. 'Most ministries of culture have hardly been powerhouses,' says J.P. Singh, a Georgetown University professor writing in the book "The Cultural Economy".

'What the ministers of culture propose at UNESCO, trade ministers oppose at the WTO. The global culture wars are also national turf wars ... Hopefully, as more discursive spaces open up for this issue, international rule-making will feature hard deliberation and find a balance between creative expression, cultural identities and patriarchal nation-states.'

The next months of 2010, which is also the Year of Biodiversity, will show if anyone is listening.

'Humanity is not going to find a way to survive if we don't find a way to live together,' UNESCO's Stenou said.

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“When I give food to the poor, they call me a saint. When I ask why the poor have no food, they call me a communist.”

— *Dom Hélder Câmara*

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