



FEZANA UN-NGO COMMITTEE
Presentation by
Behram Pastakia and Homi Gandhi
April 6-8, 2007

At the 20th Fezana Annual General Meeting
Dallas, Texas.



FEZANA's UN-NGO committee strives to provide opportunities to Zarathushtis, through volunteer action programs, to become world citizens. While the focus has been on youth development and the environment, participants are free to choose from a wide range of issues ranging from protection of human rights, social entrepreneurship, poverty reduction and micro finance, to preservation of culture and heritage; an entire range of topics is available at www.un.org. Individuals motivated in taking initiatives to reduce the gap between the haves and have-nots of our world are invited to join our team.

Two major annual conferences at the United Nations Headquarters in New York:

*[a] The Commission on the Status of Women in late February/early March, and
[b] The Department of Public Information/ Non-Governmental Organizations DPI/NGO Conference held prior to the opening of the UN General Assembly in the first fortnight of September,*

anchor the activities of the committee through the year. Participation in additional events as opportunities arise is facilitated. Reports of past participation have been printed in the journal of record of the Federation, The FEZANA Journal.

***Selection Process:** Individuals with demonstrable speaking and writing skills, are encouraged to apply by submitting their curriculum vitae and a letter of intent, describing how the objective of promoting world peace can be achieved by participation in the activities sponsored by the United Nations. There is no age or geographic bar. As per requirements of the UN, a parent or adult guardian accompanies children below the age of 18 years. The FEZANA UN-NGO Committee facilitates access to the UN premises to those selected; the responsibility to procure visas, to arrange and to pay for transport and lodging rests with the volunteers.*

The newly elected FEZANA executive reappointed the Co-Chairs in September 2006.

*For smooth running of the UN-NGO committee, which we anticipate will be an ongoing activity of the Federation; **we recommend that the status of this committee be changed from an "ad-hoc" to a Standing Committee of FEZANA.** Creation of an interactive FEZANA UN-NGO sub-site, on the federation web page remains an elusive goal. Help is solicited on this account.*

In February 2007 we submitted a report, due once every four years, to the United Nations, which is required to maintain our Consultative Status with the Economic and Social Council.

The Fezana NGO seeks to further UN humanitarian initiatives and forge ties with other NGOs, to strengthen the organization's continuing commitment to promote peace and social justice. Our objective is to learn how to translate individual achievements of Zoroastrians, in the promotion of human security and dignity, into more systematic and unified efforts.

Some of our recent and on-going activities [not a complete list]:

**After the devastating earthquake in South Asia, the North American Zoroastrian community was involved in a clothes collection and distribution drive. With transport provided gratis by United Parcel Service and collaboration from Toxy Cowasjee of Karachi, Pakistan, relief efforts energized the community all over North America to come together and work together in helping children freezing in the Kashmir winter with much needed warm clothing.*

In Honor of **International Human Rights Day and the 25th anniversary of the Declaration of Religious Freedom or Belief, The NGO Committee of Human Rights and other NGOs, including FEZANA, had co-sponsored a panel discussion on the topic of "Greatness was and can be Again" on December 7, 2006 at the Tillman Chapel of the United Nations Church Center in New York City. Cyrus Kar, filmmaker and Founder of Spenta Productions, initiated the presentation with the Edict of Cyrus (548 BCE, Persian Empire). He showed a short trailer of the documentary "In the search of Cyrus the Great" and talked about King Cyrus's policy of religious freedom. Cyrus recognized that the only environment in which all religions can live in peace side-by-side is in a secular context. All citizens within his empire were entitled to certain rights and no one, not even he himself, could violate those rights. This is the true meaning of Human Rights; the true meaning of religious freedom and tolerance.*

At the **59th UN-NGO Conference in September 2006, <http://www.unngodpiconference.org/> Behram Pastakia offered a visionary suggestion for the UN to work towards designating a season of peace between September 11 (Mahatma Gandhi's launch of the Satyagrah movement in South Africa) and September 21 (International Day of Peace). The idea was to commemorate 9/11 not as a day of violence but rather one of using the means of non-violence in responding to issues of social justice. Ambassador Anwarul Karim Chowdhury, Under-Secretary-General and High Representative for the Least Developed Countries, Landlocked Developing Countries and Small Island Developing States (OHRLLS), United Nations, has indicated that in his opinion this is a proposal he is willing to share with his colleagues at the United Nations at the appropriate time and occasion.*

Zoroastrians in North America organized "Stand Up against Poverty**" events on October 15-16, 2006 in Toronto, New York, Chicago and Washington D.C. Zoroastrian youth also organized pledge functions to create awareness of the Millennium Development Goals regarding poverty alleviation, at their local schools. Those participating were pictured on the UN's millennium web site: <http://www.standagainstopoverty.org/> and went into the Guinness Book of World Records along with a massive total of **23,542,614** participants in **11,646** events around the globe.*

Minoee Modi represented FEZANA at **the youth, women's, and general assemblies of the Religions for Peace held in **Hiroshima and Kyoto, Japan** in - August 2006. A report is available on the FEZANA Blogs hosted on the web-site of the Federation and a summary shall be published in a future issue of FEZANA Journal.*

Dinyar Patel, Homi Gandhi, et al, were at the **Gujarati World Congress in Edison, New Jersey on the Labor Day weekend in September, 2006. Active collaboration with Parsis in Ahmedabad, India was sought and obtained for exhibit materials displayed at the Congress at the Parsi stall – [FEZANA Journal, Fall 2006 issue].*

** **Unity Walk in New York** on 9/11- Homi Gandhi was the Zoroastrian representative and offered prayers at the closing session. Plans are underway for the Unity Walk in September 2007 [FEZANA Journal Fall 2006 issue pages 69- 71] Homi is now featured on the newly created web-site <http://www.911unitywalk.org/> as the Unity Walk takes its message of peace to involve cities in other parts of the globe.*

* Behram Pastakia represented the UN-NGO team at the **FEZANA Orientation workshop** in Chicago, on the Labor Day weekend in September 2006 and shared the ideas of a season of service and a season of peace [see below] for approval by the executive committee and for adoption by FEZANA's member associations in the years ahead.

* **Unity Walk in Washington DC** on 9/10 - Shara Godiwalla, Dinyar Patel, Zal Damkevala and Behram Pastakia, met with Arun Gandhi, grandson of M.K.Gandhi who was invited to speak at the 100th anniversary of the launch of Satyagrah. For distribution at the walk, donation of 350 copies of the autobiography of M.K. Gandhi "My Experiments with Truth" was made through the good offices of Dr Sudarshan Iyengar Vice-Chancellor, Gujarat Vidyapith, and Ahmedabad. The Gandhi Smriti and Darshan Samiti, New Delhi shared costs of transport of these books from India to the USA. During a personal visit in January 2007, the Vice Chancellor indicated to Behram that there would be possibilities of collaborating with FEZANA on issues of common interest in years ahead.

*At a **Seminar in Montreal on World religions after 9/11** - Dolly Dastoor, Roshni Kasad, Jehan Bagli and Farishta Dinshaw {FEZANA Journal, Fall 2006 issue} presented a panel discussion on **"Responsibility Beyond Borders – A Zoroastrian Perspective"**.

* **Phee Vania** has taken on the responsibility as chair of the North American Zoroastrian Congress in Toronto, Canada this year [June/July 2007], where **a plan for mentoring youth**, the outlines of which she presented at the last FEZANA AGM [May 2006] in Atlanta, Georgia, will be unveiled.

* Zal Damkevala and Behram Pastakia, participated in the **Walk for the Homeless** in the District of Columbia, an annual event held on the Saturday before Thanksgiving. To mark the 20th anniversary of this event, <http://www.helpthehomelessdc.org/> the program expands in 2007 to include additional cities.

*Anahita Dua, a subscriber to the concept of **Zarathushti Youth Without Borders** was in Africa and Palestine over the summer vacations on a medical humanitarian mission.

*Roda Patel, continues to offer opportunities for Zarathushti youth to participate in village Kharel, Navsari District, Gujarat, India to work for malnourished children and anganwadis through www.gramseva.org

***Roshni Kasad** continues as point person to provide opportunities for **service for the soul**, overseas with www.indicorps.org

***Sherri Billimoria** spent part of her summer vacation working with underprivileged children in Maharashtra, India, with **Akanksha** ["aspiration" in Sanskrit] an organization run by Shaheen Mistri, which was featured as the cover story of **Parsiana**, Dec 7th 2006.

***Shireen Cama** walked for AIDS awareness in Boston and worked for the summer teaching adolescents in Nicaragua. She, with Vishtasp Souroushian, is guest editor of the Winter 2006/Spring 2007 issue of FEZANA Journal and they have together launched **the Zarathushti Social Justice Network** [Appendix # 1]

* **Roxanna Mirza** was selected as the Zoroastrian representative to the **youth council of the Religions for Peace** after her participation at a meeting in New York.

* Behram Pastakia was in Mumbai at the **"Coming Together" Roundtable** at Dadar Parsi Athornan Madressa - 8th Jan 2007- [See report presented at the 20th FEZANA AGM being held in Dallas, Texas and in *FEZANA Journal*, 2007 by Roshan Rivetna]. An offer was put on the roundtable for **Zarathushti organizations worldwide to start the process of applying for consultative status with ECOSOC** and Fezana members, with their past experience would stand ready to help to facilitate this process. In response to an item of information shared by Alayar Dabestani of a plan submitted from Australia to erect statues of Cyrus the Achemenian, in major cities all over the world, Behram suggested that **replicas of the Cylinder of Cyrus** which stands as a symbol of freedom of religion and human rights be considered instead, as has been successfully accomplished in a park in San Diego, California; an idea supported by Khojeste Mistree. On behalf of Porus Dadabhoy of Illinois, Behram presented an update on **Zarathushti Doctors without Borders**, a legacy of the North American Zoroastrian congress held in Chicago in 2002.

*Shekufeh Zonji, was a Counselor **for a youth development camp in Toronto** [FEZANA Journal Fall 2006 issue] highlighting issues of global poverty, focusing on water, with ideas from the "Engineers without Borders" team of McMaster University.

* **Dinyar Patel**, in collaboration with Nawaz Merchant and Hormuzd Katki has launched a **Zarathushti Oral History Project**, a legacy of the World Gujarati Congress of September 2006, results of which shall be published in the Fall 2007 issue of FEZANA Journal. [Appendix # 2]

* **Trita Parsi**, president of the National Iranian-American Council and a SAIS graduate, held an interactive session on ***The Iranian Entanglement*** at a forum hosted by the student-run **Paul H. Nitze School of Advanced International Studies [SAIS]** Middle East Perspectives Club of the **Johns Hopkins University, Washington DC in February 2007**

* **CSW meeting in New York February/March 2007** -- Eleven participants, from ages 7 to 65 represented FEZANA at UN Headquarters. The International Women's Day was celebrated worldwide with locally organized events on 8th March, this year. Traditionally, the incumbent Secretary General of the United Nations attends the CSW meeting on this day to share his thoughts with the world community, on the subject of empowering women.

The themes for the upcoming CSW meetings are:

2008 - Financing for gender equality and the empowerment of women

2009 - The equal sharing of responsibilities between women and men, including care giving in the context of HIV/AIDS

Plans for the future:

We endorse the concept of a **chaordic organization** as an effective model for working at national and international levels. This translates into a number of individuals or groups finding for themselves ways and means (**chaos** has value in that it allows the creative juices to flow) to work toward a common goal (which provides the **order** required for a successful outcome of the enterprise). Learning from our experience of the clothes collection drive for survivors of the earthquake in South Asia, we propose two time frames in the year for action programs to be undertaken at a local level, when Zarathushtis all across North America could be working in unison:

The first is for a month from 21st March, the spring equinox, our Jamshedi Navroze, and the original earth day, to 22nd April, the more recently declared earth day – designated as **a season of service**.

The second is for ten days from 9/11, the day of the launch of the Satyagrah movement, to 9/21, the day of prayer as assigned by the United Nations -- designated as **a season of peace**.

Diana Vania is spearheading the “**Operation Eyesight**” campaign in conjunction with IMPACT; the North American Zoroastrian Congress scheduled to be held in Toronto, Canada from 29th June to 2nd July 2007. www.zoro-impact.com Participants attending the congress are requested to collect used and useable eye-glasses and bring them to Toronto. Please enable us to give the gift of sight to the needy in developing countries. A group of volunteers from the Lions Club under the leadership of Khush Bodhan from California will travel abroad to personally distribute the eye-glasses during the Thanksgiving week of 2007. It is our hope that Operation Eyesight, a legacy of the 7th WZC in Houston, becomes an ongoing activity of FEZANA held in conjunction with the biennial Zarathushti North American Congresses.

Plans are underway to hold the 3rd annual **Unity Walk** on Embassy Row on Sunday, 9/9/2007, 9/11 Unity Walk | 4000 Cathedral Ave. NW | Washington | DC | 20016 USA A tool-kit for those wishing to begin this activity in their own cities is available at <http://www.911unitywalk.org/>

We have developed a working relationship with the Chaplain at the **UN chapel** and plan to continue to participate in programs held annually around the time of the Opening of the UN General Assembly at the Chapel in the Church Building across from UN Headquarters and at St Bartholomew's church in Manhattan, New York. Our hope, yet unrealized, is to have the Zarathushti symbol of fire hanging in the UN Chapel along with the symbols of other major world religions represented there.

Zarathushtis interested in participating in UN-NGO activities are requested to contact Homi Gandhi homidgandhi@gmail.com and Behram Pastakia, bpastakia@aol.com . We look forward to hearing from motivated individuals, to listen to their ideas and seek avenues of collaboration, to build on what has been accomplished over the last five years, since we embarked on this journey together.

Homi D. Gandhi, Glen Rock, NJ
Behram Pastakia, Bethesda, MD
Co-Chairs of the FEZANA UN-NGO committee
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Appendix # 1

Zarathushti Social Justice Network

Greetings everyone!

As you may have read in the Fall 2006 issue of *FEZANA Journal*, Vishtasp Soroushian and I are trying to put together a *Zarathushti Social Justice Network* with the intent of connecting Zarathushtis (and those with interest in the Zarathushti faith) who are interested in issues of social justice. We have several people within our community who are passionate about social justice and have tried to play an active role in improving the world around them. The problem is, however, that many of us are unaware of the wonderful work that others within our community are/have been engaged in. We're hoping that this network will help change that.

If you would like to connect with other like-minded Zarathushtis, please do consider being part of the Zarathushti Social Justice Network database (that can be accessed once you have joined our yahoo group). The objective of the database is to provide a searchable tool that we can all use to contact people with similar interests for things such as receiving/providing advice on careers, jobs, and service opportunities.

To join our yahoo group, please go to www.yahoo.com and click on "Groups" on the side panel. When prompted, search for "zsjn1".

If you would like to be part of the database, please email us at zorosocjustnetw1@yahoo.com with as much of the following information as you would like to share:

Name

Gender/Age

Email address

Telephone number

Residing city/country

Profession/current education level

Past experience related to social justice

Specific experience or area of interest related to social justice

Thanks again for efforts in promoting social justice!

Ushta te,

Shireen Cama
zorosocjustnetw1@yahoo.com

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The Zarathushti Oral History Project

The Zarathushti Oral History Project is looking for volunteers: we need local coordinators in order to help publicize the project, identify volunteers, and coordinate interviews.

Objective: The Zarathushti Oral History Project is an effort to document our heritage as Zarathushtis. The aim of the project is for youth to interview Zarathushtis, especially seniors, and record their oral histories for posterity. We plan to excerpt interviews for the Fall 2007 issue of the FEZANA Journal. Second, we hope that it will stimulate youth interest in their heritage and culture. In the Diaspora, much of our culture risks being lost once the immigrant generations pass on.

Reasons: In the past century, the Zarathushti community has witnessed remarkable transformations. After more than a millennium of existence in the rural strongholds of Gujarat, Yazd, and Kerman, Zarathushtis have become a largely urbanized, well-educated people dispersed around the world. Many members of our elder generation have witnessed first-hand the changes that have greatly impacted our culture, traditions, and religion. It is in our interests to record their stories while they are still with us; within the Parsi community, 30 percent of the population is above the age of 60.

Examples of Topics for discussion : Historical, cultural, and religious in nature - are diverse and unlimited. Examples include: Life in a Gujarati or Iranian village, village customs and traditions, life in India and Iran during the Second World War, Parsis in the Indian independence movement and newly independent India and Pakistan, migrations from Yazd and Kerman to Tehran, or from rural Gujarat to towns in Gujarat to cities all over India, Zoroastrianism in the Pahlavi era, reasons for migrating to North America, and how early Zarathushti immigrants adjusted to life outside of their homelands.

Interviewees: Interviewees are the heart of this project. We need people who are willing and interested to share their experiences and recollections of personal and historic events, describe daily life when they were children, as well as their migration stories.

Interviewers: Although we encourage anyone to participate as interviewers, we are especially looking for youths. Youth participation will be a way to foster interest in their family and community heritage. Ideally, this project could be integrated into the religious classes offered within associations. Youth participation in the project may fulfill community service requirements in some schools.

Local Coordinators: We are looking for people to help coordinate interviews in their area. The project contacts listed below will mail interviewers suggested topics and questions and notes about how to take oral histories.

Inputs, suggestions, and comments related to this project are greatly appreciated. We do hope that you can help make the Zarathushti Oral History project a success!

Contacts:

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