



# **FEZANA'S PARTNERSHIP WITH THE UNITED NATIONS**

**By: Homi Gandhi  
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## **THE GENESIS OF FEZANA'S PARTICIPATION AT THE UN**

FEZANA was placed on the Roster of Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) of the United Nations in 1997. This was done through the great efforts of Rohinton Rivetna and other volunteers in our community.

In the spring of 2002, Rohinton Rivetna asked Behram Pastakia of Metropolitan Washington DC, to lead the effort to make FEZANA a more active NGO at the UN. Despite its NGO status, FEZANA had been fairly dormant for the five years, since it had first received that status. Behram's initial response was that a representative from the New York area should ideally undertake this task, since the UN Headquarters was located there. However, when informed that FEZANA was likely to lose its consultative status with ECOSOC unless it did something, Behram agreed to actively participate in this activity.

I learned all this from Rohinton Rivetna at the last AGM in Montreal, Canada, and it was agreed that Behram and I would work together on this project. At his request, I researched what it would take to revive FEZANA's status at the UN and made a brief presentation to the FEZANA executive and Rohinton Rivetna in Chicago at the North American Zoroastrian Congress. At that meeting, the FEZANA Executive asked Behram and me to coordinate the FEZANA activities at the UN. And we have worked on this ever since.

### **FEZANA'S PARTICIPATION AT THE 55<sup>TH</sup> ANNUAL DPI/NGO CONFERENCE**

Behram and I participated with a group of Zoroastrian youth at the 55<sup>th</sup> Annual DPI/NGO Conference entitled "Rebuilding Societies Emerging from Conflict: A Shared Responsibility," held at the UN Headquarters in New York City, on September 9-11, 2002. The team was selected after we had briefly interviewed candidates suggested to us by others and evaluated their commitment to the UN and Zoroastrian causes. The team included Tenaz Dubash, Susan Karani, Mitra Mehr, Jehan Panthaki, and Mehr Pastakia. Before attending the meeting, there was a lot of hard work put in by all the team members in preparing a press kit for distribution. A copy of the press kit is attached. The press kit publicized our participation at the UN level as well as the work of Zoroastrians in furthering the humanitarian goals of the UN, in the media.

This was the first time that FEZANA has been represented at such a gathering after obtaining its NGO status almost 5 years ago. The Conference was attended by more than 700 NGOs with over 2500 representatives from more than 80 countries. It opened with a welcoming address by Shashi Tharoor, UN Under Secretary-General for Communications & Public Information, which highlighted the goal of the Conference: to discuss how we all can contribute towards bringing happiness, peace, and prosperity to our extended human family. This was followed by the addresses from Han Seung-soo, President of the 56<sup>th</sup> session of the UN general Assembly, Louise Frechette, UN Deputy Secretary-General, and Mary Robinson, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights and a former President of Ireland. Donald Treimann, Executive Committee Chair of NGO/DPI, and Sherrill Kazan Alvarez de Toledo,

Conference Chair. These leaders set the tone of the Conference by echoing the goals identified by Shashi Tharoor and bringing their unique perspectives on each of them to the table.

Prior to the Conference, the team participated in a brainstorming session to identify the areas of interest on which we wanted to concentrate our energy. We had identified “Youth Development” and “Environment” as two areas about which we wanted to learn the most. Although we had identified sessions that were of individual interest, we ensured that we covered the above two areas fully with an eye on our future participation at the UN. Our team participated in most of the workshops, made many contacts, and even met with some Zoroastrians working at different UN agencies: Rosy & Jimmy Rustomji (UNICEF) and Nosh Nalawala (UNDP).

The team also decided that as far as FEZANA's participation as an NGO was concerned, we would adopt a policy that in all our efforts, we would not engage in proselytizing. From a practical point of view, in terms of being able to obtain funds from secular or non-Zoroastrian sources for projects that needed financing in the future, this was considered wise. Experienced Zarathushti hands at the UN endorsed this approach.

Behram and I wore “Daglis” on the first and last days of the Conference. Our presence was thus noticed from the very first day when we walked into the center aisle of the UN General Assembly. Many participants came to us with a desire to know more about us. Some of them were quite surprised to hear that Zoroastrianism was still a living religion, that is practiced in many parts of the world.

Our unique attire helped to open many doors: At the evening reception on the first day, we had an opportunity to exchange pleasantries with Kofi Annan, UN Secretary General and Shashi Tharoor. We were invited to participate in the ceremony of ringing the Bell of Peace and to walk in the procession at the annual Interfaith Service of Commitment to the work of the UN at St. Bartholomew's Church on September 11, 2002. This service was to mark the opening of the 57<sup>th</sup> Session of the UN General Assembly and a Celebration of Remembrance and Hope, dedicated to the Victims of Violence Everywhere. Our ZAGNY Mobed Pervez Patel performed the Zoroastrian Prayer at the Service. [See article by Mehr Pastakia in FEZANA Journal Spring 2003 entitled "UN General Assembly Session opens with Inter-religious Prayer"]

This was a wonderful experience for the team. As “new kids on the block,” we learned a lot about what we, Zoroastrians and FEZANA, can do in terms of humanitarian work and projects with the UN, and FEZANA incurred no expenses for its representation at the UN. Each team member paid for his or her own travel and other expenses.

## **FEZANA'S CONTINUING PARTICIPATION AT THE UN**

After the Conference, FEZANA participated in UN activities as follows:

### ***Participation at the 47<sup>th</sup> session of the UN Commission on the Status of Women:***

Dolly Dastoor, Zareen Aaroz, Susan Karani, Aysha and Yasmin Ghadiali attended the 47<sup>th</sup> session of the UN Commission on the Status of Women between March 3-14, 2003.

### ***Religious Faith and International Humanitarian Action Meeting:***

FEZANA was represented at the "Religious Faith and International Action Conference" held in Washington DC on March 27-28, 2003. Niloufer Randeria, a student at the Johns Hopkins University working toward a degree in public health, participated as the Zarathushti youth representative. Behram Pastakia was an invited panelist for the opening session.

Hosted by the American Red Cross, at their Headquarters, next to the White House, the meeting provided access to decision makers and funding agency representatives interested in humanitarian work undertaken by non-governmental organizations. The meeting was sponsored by the Congressional Hunger Center, the Center for Religion and Democracy of the University of Virginia and the Council on Faith and International Affairs. Zarathushtis were invited to present their perspective in the opening session – Behram was one of five invited panel speakers--- on how their religious scriptures, their faith, and their traditions provide a foundation for humanitarian action.

The ZAMWI board of trustees had invited any Zarathushti interested in participating to come to Metropolitan Washington DC – members were happy to host visitors from the FEZANA family in their own homes. Future participation in such events by Zarathushtis interested in humanitarian action is strongly encouraged.

A summary of the proceedings, list of panelists representing different faiths, and photographs from the event are available at: [http://www.hungercenter.org/events/eventsummary\\_032703\\_panelists.html](http://www.hungercenter.org/events/eventsummary_032703_panelists.html). A more detailed report is scheduled to be published by the Pew Charitable Trust. The contact person for follow-up and information about future activities is Margaret Zeigler ([mzeigler@hungercenter.org](mailto:mzeigler@hungercenter.org)). A list of contacts of those attending the meeting is available from Shelly Cheatham ([scheatham@hungercenter.org](mailto:scheatham@hungercenter.org)).

### ***Youth Program in Partnership with the Gram Seva Trust:***

We have identified humanitarian projects where North American Zoroastrian youth can be involved in India, and are in the process of identifying such projects in Pakistan, Afghanistan and Iran.

In India, such an opportunity is being offered by the Gram Seva Trust Project at Kharel, Gujarat, where, Dr. Roda Patel, has contributed for many years. I visited Kharel for a day in January 2003 to find out more about the project. The Kharel project is dedicated to eradicating malnutrition of children, educating expectant mothers about the basic principles of

health and health education, and creating awareness about family planning, education, and economic development with self-help. Although there is much to be done, I was very impressed by the impact the Gram Seva has had in this area. For instance, in 1999, 30% of approximately 2,000 children in Gamdevi area were suffering from moderate to severe malnutrition. In 2002, this percentage came down to just over 8%.

On this side of the world, we are working with one or two Zoroastrian youth, who are interested in working in Kharel during the summer. [See articles by Suzie Karani in the winter 2002 issue of FEZANA Journal entitled: “United Nations DPI/NGO Conference—Zarathushti Youth Involvement” page 15 and “Humanitarian and Gathic Education—a call to Zarathushti youth” page 62]. We will have an opportunity to learn about the benefits of such a program for our youth from Niloufer Randeria, who is considering joining Dr. Roda Patel in Kharel after she finishes her degree at the Johns Hopkins University. [See FEZANA journal winter 2002 page 93 article entitled: “Roda Patel pursues mission of “Total Health” for village children in Gujarat”].

***Zoroastrian Participation in the Planning of the next Annual NGO/DPI Conference at the United Nations:***

Susan Karani participated at the DPI/NGO Conference Planning meetings and Conference Workshop Committee meetings. She submitted proposals for workshop topics of relevance to Zoroastrians, as well as Zoroastrian speakers who could address those topics at the next conference. Thus, FEZANA and the Zoroastrian community were given a voice in planning the next annual NGO/DPI Conference at the United Nations.

***Working towards the Year of Zarathustra:***

Behram Pastakia, in conjunction with Dr. Shernaz Cama, Director of the PARZOR project under UNESCO, has been researching how the UN may be persuaded to name a year, the “Year of Zarathustra”. Although Behram has viewed this as a long term goal, we have just learned that UNESCO has named 2003 the “Year of Zarathustra”. You will undoubtedly hear of worldwide celebrations in connection with this designation in the very near future.

**RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE FUTURE**

***A Central Data Bank Chronicling Zoroastrian Contributions:***

Through participation in the NGO Conference last year, we learned of the tremendous contribution of Zoroastrians in furthering the humanitarian goals of the UN. However, there was no central repository where these facts about the work of our community worldwide are compiled. Although our “Press Kit” detailed these contributions, research for these contributions entailed calling up people randomly and asking for information. This data should be more readily accessible, not only for events such as this Conference, but so that members of our community may take pride in the knowledge of the contributions of their co-religionists and be inspired by the same. Therefore, this information should be compiled in a central “Data Bank”. To this end, I need two committed youth volunteers to take up this challenge ASAP. To start with, an electronic copy of the press kit is available, if FEZANA wishes to put it on its website.

***Transferring NGO Status to a World Zoroastrian Organization:***

The UN-NGO status for the FEZANA is a vehicle for the Zoroastrian community to participate at the highest level in the Community of Nations. In our opinion, this honor should be made available to an International Association of Zoroastrians as and when the Zoroastrian community has an agreed “World Organization of Zoroastrians”. Till that time, we suggest that UN-NGO Participation Committee be a separate Ad-hoc Committee or Sub-Committee so that as and when the dream of a World Zoroastrian Body is fulfilled, the status can be transferred to that new entity without any organizational problems. We have discussed this with Rohinton Rivetna, Firdosh Mehta, and other elder statesmen in the Zoroastrian community and they are in agreement with our thought process.

***Funding Participation in UN Activities:***

As I stated earlier, all expenses for this first year were borne by the individual members of the team. We continue to believe that major expenses like travel, boarding and lodging be borne by the individual persons participating in the program. However, we need to have a budget of \$1,000 for this committee for Administrative expenses like Printing, Postage and Communications.

***Participation at the Local Level:***

We are starting to make our presence felt at the UN. The next step for us is to spread this message of participation at the local Zoroastrian association level so that more Zoroastrians get involved in various projects. This will also help in establishing a road map for the younger Zoroastrians to participate at the UN level in the future. [See article by Mehr Pastakia in HAMA ZOR, a publication of the WZO, Issue 1 2003 page 30 entitled: "Our Zoroastrian community at the United Nations].

Please feel free to contact myself or Behram Pastakia if you have any further inquiries regarding this matter.

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