

## **FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

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### **Zoroastrians participate at the United Nations**

The Federation of Zoroastrian Associations of North America (FEZANA) will send eleven of its representatives to the United Nations' Fifty-sixth Annual Conference For Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs). The Conference, "***Human Security and Dignity: Fulfilling the Promise of the United Nations***", will take place from September 8 - 10, 2003, at the United Nations in New York City. Organized by the United Nations Department of Public Information (DPI) and the NGO/DPI Executive Committee, this is the foremost NGO event at the United Nations each year. Last year, more than 2,000 people from 70 countries, representing 760 NGOs, attended the NGO Conference.

This year's Conference, "***Human Security and Dignity: Fulfilling the Promise of the United Nations***", will explore the various sources of human security, focusing on policies and programmes that emphasize economic and social development, human rights and a healthy environment. Speakers will include high-level government and UN officials, educators, psychologists and policy-makers. Participants will examine the psychological aspects of human security and dignity, focusing on mental health, spirituality, prejudice and tolerance. Educators will highlight the impact of education on development and on economic, personal and social security. Panels will also discuss the leadership techniques of those who have been successful in inspiring empowerment within oppressed societies. Participants will further examine sustainable development in the context of globalization. Finally, policy-makers from around the world will examine emerging global trends and strategies, to cope with issues such as HIV/AIDS and other pandemics that pose a deadly threat to the security and dignity of millions of people.

### **What is FEZANA?**

FEZANA has been a registered non-profit, religious and charitable organization since June 2, 1987. It functions as a coordinating organization for Zoroastrian associations in North America. It is dedicated to the task of promoting the study, understanding and practice of the Zoroastrian faith, and the welfare of its followers. It is mandated to represent the religious interests of its membership in national and international forums. FEZANA has 24 Zoroastrian associations as its members and over 25,000 individual constituents. It is also registered as an NGO dedicated to assisting communities in distress. FEZANA's objectives are to learn how to translate the individual achievements of its members, in the promotion of human security and dignity, into a more systematic and unified effort by the organization. It also seeks opportunities to promote

various United Nations humanitarian initiatives and forge ties with other NGOs.

### **Zoroastrian Achievements in promoting human security and dignity**

**Roda Patel's Contributions to the Gram Seva Trust:** One of FEZANA's representatives at the Conference, Dr. Roda Patel, deserves recognition for her work towards promoting "human security and dignity" at the Gram Seva Trust in Gujarat, India. The Trust has been an active NGO since 1994, serving the poor in surrounding 41 villages. At the Trust, Dr. Patel initiated a project on health, nutrition and education to provide a holistic approach to healthcare for children in the area. Her main focus is to combat malnutrition in the formative years of childhood. The importance of this project is reflected within the UN Millennium Development Goals, which cites the eradication of extreme poverty and hunger as a primary goal. Dr. Patel now spends four months each year at the Trust improving and expanding the project to assist more children. She also encourages and facilitates volunteer participation at the Trust by making arrangement for food and lodging for volunteers.

**Khorshed Jungalwala's work against discrimination:** Ms. Jungalwala is actively involved in projects related to religious and social discrimination in North America, one of which is sponsored by the Pluralism Project of Harvard University. Her work involves bringing parties together through mediation; educating the public about customs and traditions that are unknown to them; and providing help to those who are not in a position to help themselves against discrimination. As President of MetroWest International Concerts Association (1992 - 2001), she also raised funds and successfully obtained grants for underprivileged, talented children in the field of music and dance. At present, Ms. Jungalwala is involved in helping recent immigrants with scholarships for further study of fine arts and raising funds to sponsor special classical and semi-classical free concerts for the community around Boston. She is also the Chair of FEZANA's Publications Committee and the Chair of FEZANA's World Body Working Group.

### **Zoroastrianism and its followers**

Among faiths practiced in the world today, Zoroastrianism (also known as the *Zarathushti* religion or *Zarathushtrianism*) is scarcely known, but is very much alive. It presently has an estimated 270,000 followers. However, Zoroastrianism was once the imperial religion of the Persian empire, dominant during the Achaemenian (559 - 334 B.C.E), Parthian (250 B.C.E - 227 C.E) and Sassanian (226 - 651 C.E) periods, stretching at one time across central Asia, west towards Rome and Greece, east into India, north into Russia, and south into Egypt.

Acknowledged as one of the earliest monotheistic faiths, Zoroastrianism embraces the worship of one God (*Ahura Mazda*) and is based on the revelations and teachings of the prophet Zoroaster (*Zarathushtra*) (circa 1400 B.C.E). The main Zoroastrian scripture, the Avesta, includes the Gathas (the divine hymns of Zoroaster) in which people are encouraged to use their good mind to dispel evil. Humans are granted free will and must bear personal responsibility for their actions. The Zoroastrian faith calls upon its followers to pursue an ethical life through a three-fold path of "Good thoughts, Good words and Good deeds". Individuals must strive to develop the values of a good mind, truth, righteousness, strength, service and piety, to attain perfection and immortality. Living in harmony with nature and respecting all manifestations of light and fire as symbols of God's greatness is also central to the Zoroastrian faith. It was during the centuries of Persian rule that Zoroastrian doctrines (belief in one supreme God, heaven and hell, individual judgment, ultimate triumph of good over evil, a final judgment and a Messiah to come for the final restoration) are believed to have influenced Judaic and Christian theologies.

The conquest of Persia in 334 B.C.E., by Alexander of Macedonia, led to the destruction of Zoroastrian religious texts. The religion was rejuvenated as the imperial religion of the Sassanian period, when followers numbered in the millions. However, with the advent of Islam, after a crucial battle with the Arabs in 641 C.E., Persian sovereignty passed into the hands of Islamic caliphs. In Islamic Persia, Zoroastrians faced oppression causing many to flee to India in 900 C.E. The Zoroastrians who settled in India have come to be known as "Parsis". Those Zoroastrians who remained in Persia endured centuries of discrimination and persecution, but have resiliently survived as a minority group in Iran.

In the past half-century, Zoroastrians have emigrated around the world. There are approximately 25,000 Zoroastrians in North America, 12,000 in Europe, 2,500 in Australia, 2,500 in Pakistan, but the largest concentrations remain in Iran (150,000) and India (76,500). The survival of the Zoroastrian religion is remarkable when one considers the devastations it has suffered in conquests, the destruction of its scriptures, the persecution of its priests and followers or their forced conversions, and its more recent tribulations of doctrinal disputes and the loss of culture as a result of assimilation.

### **Recent Recognition of the Zoroastrian Faith**

#### **UNESCO Marks an Anniversary - The 3000th Anniversary of Zoroastrian Culture**

At its 161st and 162nd sessions, the Executive Board and General Conference of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) designated the year 2003 to celebrate the "3000th Anniversary of Zoroastrian Culture". The anniversary was proposed to UNESCO by the State of Tajikistan as a way to safeguard and honour the memory of their ancestral Zoroastrian heritage and culture. Tajikistan is planning to host gatherings to bring together Zoroastrians from all around the world to celebrate this milestone anniversary from September 5-12, 2003 and in November 2003. Other Zoroastrian communities around the world are also planning celebrations to mark this anniversary. In Mumbai, India, a three-day exhibition on Zoroastrian culture is being organized from October 2-4, 2003. In London, England, the Zoroastrian Trust Funds of Europe will launch a two-volume CD on the recitation of the Gathas, including English translations. In Vancouver, Canada, the O'Shihan Cultural Organization is hosting a music festival to honour the musical traditions of ancient Persian nations and tribes (Kurd, Baluch, Azari, Lor, Afghan, Dari/Zartoshti, Mazandarani, Guilak, Tajik, Assyrian, and others).

#### **The PARZOR Project**

With the extensive emigration of the Zoroastrian community from India in recent years, it has become increasingly necessary to preserve Parsi-Zoroastrian culture and history in a comprehensive and organized way. Consequently, in 1999, UNESCO, New Delhi initiated the Parzor Project, "Preservation of Parsi Zoroastrian Heritage - Campaigns and International Conventions". While the project initially only intended to record Parsi experiences and revive interest in the Parsi-Zoroastrian community in India, the overwhelming support and encouragement for the project throughout the world, has enabled it to provide information on the Zoroastrian faith to scholars, the media, and publishers. The project has also been successful in establishing links in Iran, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Uzbekistan, Afghanistan, Tajikistan and Azerbaijan, where efforts are being made to rediscover lost Zoroastrian culture and heritage.

### **The FEZANA Team**

**HOMI GANDHI** was born in Bharuch, India. He holds a Bachelor of Commerce degree from

Bombay University and a Bachelor of Science (Economics) from the University of London. A Fellow of the Institute of Chartered Accountants in England and Wales, Homi has provided pro bono accounting services to many non-profit organizations. Homi has been an active volunteer in the *Junior Achievement Program* in New York City helping children in public high schools to focus on their studies and identifying opportunities for them in the real world. For the last two years, Homi has also participated in the *Everybody Wins Program* for New York City elementary school students, helping students to cultivate good reading habits. Recently, Homi participated in the *Rainbow/Push Wall Street Project*. At present, he works as a Principal Examiner in the Regulation Division of the New York Stock Exchange. Homi is FEZANA's Main Representative at the United Nations. Homi also serves as the President of the Zoroastrian Association of Greater New York (ZAGNY) and oversees the administration of various ZAGNY public interest initiatives, including the community's participation in various activities in memory of 9/11, and the Revlon Walk in aid of the Eradication of Breast Cancer.

**BEHRAM PASTAKIA** was born in Mumbai, India, and immigrated to the United States in 1977. He is a physician, trained at the University of Wisconsin and the University of Virginia, specializing in Nuclear Medicine and Magnetic Resonance Imaging. While conducting research at the National Institute of Health at its intra-mural program in Bethesda, Maryland, he was on the radiology faculty of Georgetown University and George Washington University, Washington D.C. Behram's involvement with the United Nations began as a medical student at the All-India Institute of Medical Sciences, New Delhi. As Chairman of the Organizing Committee for an International Medical Students seminar held to coincide with the United Nations designated "World Population Year", he worked with the United Nations Fund For Population Activities, the Swedish International Development Agency, various interested NGO's and the Government of India. The seminar addressed, among a host of related topics, the issue of changing the curriculum in medical schools so that future generations of doctors could deal proactively with the world's burgeoning population. The population dynamics of religion, economic development and education have been a focus of his activities ever since. Behram is currently the President of the Zoroastrian Association of Metropolitan Washington D.C. Inc. (ZAMWI) and is also a member of the World Zarathushti Chamber of Commerce. He would like to participate in United Nations DPI fora to create awareness that the ancient religion founded by the prophet Zarathushtra, is alive, and that practicing members of this community participate actively, based on their faith traditions to promote the mission of the UN.

**SUSAN KARANI** was born in Highland Park, Illinois. She received her Bachelor of Arts degree with Honours in Political Science and International Studies from the University of Chicago. She is currently pursuing her Masters in Human Rights Studies at Columbia University. Susan's experience involves a variety of human rights work in the U.S., France and India. She has also assisted Mumbai advocate Maharukh Adenwalla in writing a book entitled, *Child Sexual Abuse and the Law* (ICHRL 2000). Susan is honoured to be representing FEZANA in its second year of participation at the UN and hopes to learn how FEZANA can better serve other communities in need.

**AYSHA GHADIALI** grew up in the New York area and attended Boston University, where she earned her Bachelor of Arts degree in Political Science and History with high honours in 2001. She recently served as a Peace Corps Volunteer in Jordan, where she worked at the Jordanian Hashemite Fund for Human Development in Sahab. Aysha worked with Jordanian women and girls through developing workshops dealing with gender issues, health and nutrition, and teaching English classes. She also wrote a grant sponsored by USAID for the continuation of such grass roots projects at her community centre. She is currently working on the staff of the Council on Foreign Relations in New York City and as a FEZANA representative to the United Nations.

**NEVILLE ANTIA** was born in Mumbai, India, and immigrated to Michigan in 1984. He received his Bachelor of Arts degree from the University of Michigan. He also received his Masters degree in Public Health, concentrating on International Health. Upon graduation, he traveled to Kenya and Tanzania to study the different public health programs offered in these countries. He had the opportunity to survey the different levels of healthcare, from primary to tertiary. Neville has also worked in Yemen for an NGO, writing a grant to CIDA on vitamin A and iron deficiency. The grant was approved and the project is now successfully up and running. He currently is in medical school in England and plans to graduate in 2005.

**FREYAN BILLIMORIA** was born in Westwood, New Jersey. She is currently a senior at Casilleja School in Palo Alto, California. Freyan has participated in a variety of conferences and workshops including a Model United Nations, the Girls Leadership Workshop, the Student Diversity Leadership Conference, and People of Color in Independent Schools. She co-leads several clubs on campus, including *Prisms*, a club addressing diversity-related issues, Model United Nations, and *Passport to the Globe*, a group that volunteers its time teaching elementary school students about other countries. Freyan also plays varsity lacrosse, acts as a peer advisor for a group of sophomores and interns at United Way Silicon Valley, and has been active on both her class government and the All Student Body (ASB). Freyan is very excited to be a member of the FEZANA team to the United Nations.

**NINA BILIMORIA** was born and grew up in Munster, Indiana. She is a rising senior at Stanford University in Palo Alto, California, majoring in International Relations and Economics. Nina's academic interests focus on international development, particularly in Latin America. Nearly fluent in Spanish, Nina lived with a family in Santiago, Chile, for three months while studying Latin American economics and Chile's transition to democracy in 1990. Field research for her Honours Thesis in International Relations will take her back to Chile in December. At Stanford, Nina is the Chair for Stanford in Government, a non-partisan public service organization committed to promoting political awareness and activism. As director of the group's fellowship program last year, Nina arranged for 26 Stanford students to work at public policy and governmental organizations around the world. This summer, Nina worked as an Eben Tisdale high-tech public policy fellow in Philips Electronics' Government Relations office in Washington D.C. Her major project there was to help Philips gain a share in the US/UN-led Iraq reconstruction project, restoring critical infrastructure and healthcare and developing a democracy in war-torn Iraq. Nina is very grateful to have the opportunity to represent FEZANA to the United Nations in September.

**RODA PATEL** was born in India and holds MBBS and MD degrees, specializing in Paediatrics from the University of Bombay. She immigrated to the United States in 1963. She came as an exchange student and a Fulbright scholar on securing a Research Fellowship in Neonatology at the University of Illinois. She was the Director of Ambulatory Paediatrics at Lutheran General Hospital, Parkridge, and practiced paediatrics in the Chicago area. Since 1995, she has been going to India as an honorary paediatrician. She now works with the Gram Seva Trust in Gujarat, India, where she has spearheaded a program for health, nutrition and education for impoverished children in the area.

**TRITA PARSİ** has worked for the Swedish Permanent Mission to the UN in New York, where he served in the Security Council handling affairs for Afghanistan, Iraq, Tajikistan and Western Sahara, and the General Assembly's Third Committee addressing human rights in Iran, Afghanistan, Myanmar and Iraq. Mr. Parsi is currently pursuing his Ph.D. at Johns Hopkins

University's School of Advanced International Studies under Professor Francis Fukuyama, while working part-time as a policy advisor to Chairman Robert Ney (R-OH) on the Middle East and Iran. Mr. Parsi was born in Iran and grew up in Sweden. He earned a Masters degree in International Relations at Uppsala University and a second Masters degree in Economics at Stockholm School of Economics.

**ROHAN VILMS** was born in Palo Alto, California, and moved with his family to Mumbai, India, a few years later. He moved back to Palo Alto after 8 years, and he currently attends Palo Alto High School as a senior. He has recently been involved with volunteering at the office of his local State Assemblyman, Joe Simitian, as well as locally competing and coaching younger children at tennis. He is also involved with school and community theatre activities and participates as a witness on his school's Mock Trial Team. His volunteer efforts include helping out in a local environmental project and in a local senior centre. Rohan is honoured to represent FEZANA and the Zoroastrian community, of which he is a proud member. He is especially eager to further understand the expanding role of FEZANA and all NGOs in fulfilling the humanitarian promise of the United Nations.

**SHANAYA MISTRY** was born in Mumbai, India, and immigrated to Toronto in 1988. She received her Honours Bachelor of Arts degree in Political Science and French from the University of Western Ontario. She received her Bachelor of Laws from the University of Ottawa. She expects to be called to the Ontario Bar in September 2003. She pursued her interest in political and social issues by volunteering at the parliamentary office of Carolyn Parrish, her Member of Parliament, while she attended law school in Ottawa. Shanaya's interest in the Conference stems from her desire to use her legal degree in a way that promotes social justice. Moreover, she is proud to contribute and learn from this Conference as a member of a Zoroastrian organization.