



FEZANA

The Federation of Zoroastrian Associations of North America

www.fezana.org

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The Zoroastrian Faith participates at the United Nations' Fifty-fifth Annual Conference of Non-Governmental Organizations

The Federation of Zoroastrian Associations of North America (FEZANA) will send a team of seven Zoroastrians, led by Behram Pastakia of Washington D.C., to the United Nations' Fifty-fifth Annual Conference of Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), entitled "Rebuilding Societies Emerging from Conflict: A Shared Responsibility". The Conference will take place at United Nations Headquarters in New York from 9 to 11 September, 2002. Organized by the United Nations Department of Public Information (DPI) in partnership with the NGO/DPI Executive Committee and its Planning Committee, this is the premier NGO event at the United Nations each year.

The Conference includes dignitaries, as well as United Nations and governmental associations, NGO representatives and civil society leaders who have first hand field experience in post-conflict societies and are in the forefront of the struggle to rebuild such societies. Furthermore, the Conference will also hear from citizens who have lived through the violence faced by these communities, and others who have focused on understanding the process of recovery and reconciliation.

As an NGO with consultative status with the United Nations, FEZANA has participated in rebuilding societies emerging from conflict primarily by supporting and assisting the work of individual Zarathushtis who are members of various FEZANA member associations in North America and in its sister organizations around the world. The FEZANA team comes to the Conference ready to share these individual experiences and to learn how they may be parlayed in to a more systematic effort by the organization. FEZANA is a Zarathushti organization. The Zarathushtis are followers of an ancient Persian religion – Zoroastrianism -- revealed by the prophet Zarathushtra. Throughout their history they have been known for their philanthropic contributions to society. They are received as agents of peace throughout the world.

East Timor

The most visible contribution to rebuilding societies by a Zarathushti was that of Jamshed Marker, who was appointed by Kofi Annan as the Secretary's special envoy to East Timor to bring peace and a democratically elected government to the region.

FEZANA is a NGO in consultative status (Roster) with the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations.
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Afghanistan

More recently, the Zoroastrian community has assisted Afghan refugees in Pakistan. Aban Rustomji of Houston, TX and Toxy Cowasjee of Karachi, Pakistan have made tremendous contributions in this area. A strong believer in the value of a good education, Aban wanted to use her skills as a teacher to make a difference in a post-September 11 world: "I wanted to be a bridge builder. I wanted for my US students and church groups to be aware of conditions in Afghanistan. I wanted for organizations in Pakistan-Afghanistan to have exposure to what good education can do for emerging nations."

Aban visited Afghan refugee camps in Quetta, Pakistan, to document conditions there, paying particular attention to the treatment of women and children. Knowing of the particular vulnerability of these groups during times of conflict, Aban returned from Quetta with source materials to provide her students with a tangible experience of the life of these people in the camps.

Her learning has further convinced her that children in refugee camps occupy unique positions as learners and possible transformers of culture. Noting the lack of infrastructure for a good education for these children, Aban states hopefully, "I will be returning to Quetta next year. I will continue to contact people on school curriculum issues. Maybe, I will have better luck then. They were not ready this time." For now, Aban brings their stories to American children, as she tours various halls of learning with her presentation slides and pictures.

Toxy Cowasjee is a determined 62 year old from Pakistan, who "never feels it". Toxy met with local government officials responsible for the refugee camps and created a plan of distribution to bring much needed supplies to the Afghans. She collected donations of cash and kind culminating in more than a thousand cartons containing flour, rice, sugar, oil, dates, tea, salt, clothes, shoes, much needed medical supplies, and soccer and tennis balls for the children, which she personally delivered to the refugees. Facing various bureaucratic and physical challenges, Toxy made a conscious effort to distribute supplies to the undocumented refugees who are in a "no man's land" between Pakistan and Afghanistan. With nothing to call their own, these refugees are overlooked simply because they are not meant to be there. The sight of the supplies was the cause of at least one stampede, but for the most part, the supplies were systematically distributed. Asked what inspired her to undertake the venture, Toxy replied, "I just felt terribly sorry for the Afghans who have had one nation after another waging war on them and the only ones that have suffered are the people of the land ..."

Post September 11th America

FEZANA was quick to condemn the attacks on the World Trade Center buildings and the Pentagon. Many of its member associations held candle light vigils at their centers all across the country, others fielded representatives at interfaith meetings designed to calm a grieving nation and prevent the outbreak of communal violence. Besides member associations, several individuals stepped up to do their part in response to the attacks. For instance, in Washington, D.C., Ms. Kamal Tengra, volunteered her services at a Red Cross Information Hotline communications center that was set up in the immediate aftermath of Sept. 11th. She assisted distressed family members of missing and dead individuals by being part of a team that provided answers to any and all questions that the victims' families posed.

Other Contributions of the Zarathushtis

Aban Rustomji and Toxy Cowasjee exemplify the Zarathushti ethic and the willingness of this small community to assist in great ways the well-being of all societies. Other examples of such work include, the work of Jamshed Marker, special UN envoy to East Timor, Roda Patel, the founder pediatric clinics in the Gram Seva Trust Hospital in the state of Gujarat which assist in preserving the health of children in the area, the efforts of Behram Pastakia and his team to send used eyeglasses to

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Kenya via *Operation Eyesight* to prevent blindness, and the work of other North American Zarathushtis to assist in relief efforts following the devastating earthquake faced by the residents of Gujarat, India in February 2001.

FEZANA will send its representatives to the Conference in the hope of learning more about the efforts of other groups in rebuilding societies emerging from conflict. The team hopes to formulate an action plan for FEZANA following its attendance at the Conference.

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What is FEZANA?

The Zarathushti diaspora in North America recognized the need for a North American organization to co-ordinate the activities of various local Zarathushti organizations as early as 1965. Planting the seeds for what was to become FEZANA after many years of debate, was the comment of community leader Keki Bhote in 1965: " ... it is time now, for those of us in the vanguard of this migration, to plan on ways and means to preserve our identity and our heritage while participating fully in the American way of life... therefore thirty of us in the Chicago area have started the Zoroastrian Association of America on May 23, 1965".

Mr. Bhote's vision became a reality on June 2, 1987, when the Federation of Zoroastrian Associations of North America, now commonly known as FEZANA, registered in the State of Illinois as a non-profit, religious and charitable organization, dedicated to the task of promoting the study, understanding and practice of the Zoroastrian faith, and the welfare of its followers. FEZANA was also mandated to represent the religious interests of its membership in national and international forums.

Given the philanthropic and public interest leanings of its membership, FEZANA registered as a Non-governmental Organization (NGO) dedicated to assisting communities in distress around the globe. By being represented at the 55th annual UN DPI/NGO conference FEZANA intends to seek out opportunities to work on UN-related initiatives and forge ties with NGOs that have made a difference to societies emerging from conflict.

Today, FEZANA has 24 Zarathushti associations as its members, and over 25,000 individual constituents.

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Information regarding the UN conference is available at:

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The Zarathushti Religion

Among faiths practiced in the world today, the Zarathushti religion, also known as Zoroastrianism or Zarathushtrianism, is little known and rarely mentioned. Today, there are an estimated 275,000 Zarathushtis in the world; yet, at one time, theirs was the religion of the mighty Persian empires stretched across central Asia for a thousand years; and one that has left a timeless legacy to religious thought that is as relevant today as when it was revealed 3,500 years ago.

Acknowledged as one of the earliest monotheistic faiths, the Zarathushti religion, revealed around 1,400 BCE in eastern Persia by Prophet Zarathushtra (Zoroaster to the Greeks) embraces the worship of one God, Ahura Mazda (Wise Lord). The corpus of Zarathushti scriptures, known as the Avesta includes the Gathas, divine hymns of Zarathushtra, in which men and women are encouraged to use their good mind (Vohu Manah) to vanquish evil and move God's creation towards the final renovation (frashokereti). They are granted freedom of choice with personal responsibility for one's actions. In Zarathushtra's vision, one strives to develop divine values of the good mind, truth/righteousness (Asha), strength and service (Kshathra Vairya) and piety/devotion (Armaiti) to attain the twin rewards of perfection (Haurvatat) and immortality (Ameretat). The world evolves toward renovation and excellence through the collective good acts of humanity.

The Zarathushti religion is also known as "The Good Religion" due to its commitment to ethical and moral excellence through the three-fold path of "Good thoughts, Good words, and Good deed" (Humata, Hukhta, Huvareshta). Living in harmony with nature, and veneration of all manifestations of light and fire as symbols of Ahura Mazda's creations and goodness, are also central to Zarathushtra's teachings.

The religion was dominant for over a thousand years in Persia during the Achaemenian (559 - 334 BCE), Parthian (250 BCE - 227 CE) and Sassanian (226 - 651 CE) Empires, stretching across central Asia, west towards Rome and Greece, east into India, north into Russia, and south into Egypt. The liberation of the Jews from captivity in Babylon in 539 BCE by the Persian King Cyrus and his assistance in rebuilding their temple in Jerusalem, was a historic event for which he was hailed as messiah [Isaiah 45:1-3]. The tolerance and kindness of Cyrus, recognized as the world's first declaration of human rights. It was during the ensuing centuries of Persian rule that Zarathushti doctrines (such as belief in one supreme God, heaven and hell, individual judgment, ultimate triumph of good over evil, the final judgment and a Messiah to come for the final restoration) entered Judaic and Christian theologies.

A dispiriting period in Zarathushti history followed the conquest of Persia in 334 BCE by Alexander of Macedonia, and his wanton destruction of the capital city, Persepolis, and all Zarathushti religious texts. The religion was rejuvenated as the imperial religion of the Sassanian Persian Empire and followers numbered in the millions. It reeled once again, however, with the advent of Islam: after a crucial battle with the Arabs in 641 CE, Persian sovereignty passed in to the hands of Islamic caliphs.

In Islamic Persia, Zarathushtis faced oppression causing many to flee in order to practice the religion. The few shiploads that fled to the shores of India in the 10th century maintained their religious identity and came to be known as Parsis. Those Zarathushtis who remained in Persia endured centuries of discrimination and persecution. In more recent Zarathushti history, Parsi Zarathushtis became influential as industrialists and philanthropists during the British rule in India, commanding an influence well out of proportion to their small numbers. Their co-religionists in

Iran came to gradual recognition in the twentieth century as traders, merchants and entrepreneurs.

In the past half century, Zarathushtis have emigrated around the world, readily absorbing the host culture, while practicing their religion with devotion, and endeavoring to keep the spark of their ancient tradition alive. Approximately, 25,000 Zarathushtis living in North America, 12,000 in Europe, 2,500 in Australia, 2,500 in Pakistan, with the largest concentrations remaining in Iran (150,000) and India (76,500). The survival of the Zarathushti religion through the vicissitudes of time and history, is remarkable when one considers the devastations it suffered in conquests, destruction of scriptures, annihilation of priests who maintained the oral tradition, persecutions and forced conversions, and more recent doctrinal disputes and threat of assimilation. Despite these, the essence of Zarathushtra's timeless and universal message has been preserved and perpetuated as new generations of Zarathushtis recognize the remarkable relevance of this ancient faith in today's world.

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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, pursuant to the United States Unity of Spirit Act (2002) and 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 Institutes of Health at its intra-mural program in Bethesda, Maryland, he was on the radiology faculty of Georgetown University and George Washington University, Washington DC. 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 serves on the FEZANA committee of the Zoroastrian Association of Metropolitan Washington Inc (ZAMWI) and is also a member of the World Zarathrusti Chamber of Commerce. He would like to participate in United Nations DPI fora to create awareness that the ancient religion founded by the prophet Zarathustra, is alive, and that practicing members of this community participate actively, based on their faith traditions to promote the mission of the UN.

MEHR PASTAKIA was born in Bethesda, Maryland. Currently, she is a junior at Holton-Arms High School there. She is the chair of the youth committee of ZAMWI. Mehr has done extensive work as part of the relief effort in the aftermath of the 2001 earthquake in Gujarat, India. Upon her return from Gujarat, Mehr gave presentations, including a television appearance (CBS Ch.9), addressing issues such as the Indian caste system and water shortages, which posed further challenges to the relief operation. Mehr also actively participates in *Operation Eyesight*, an organized effort by the Zoroastrian community in the US to help collect used eyeglasses, and send them to African nations such as Kenya, to help prevent blindness. Mehr is a talented performer of the Classical Indian *Kuchipudi* dance, and performs regularly at fundraising events for a variety of causes such as assisting children afflicted with AIDS and promoting diverse cultures through the Smithsonian Institutions in Washington, DC.

SUSAN KARANI was born in Highland Park, IL. She received her Bachelor of Arts degree with Honors 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 public interest work including work for: the University of Chicago Human Rights Program (Grant recipient 2000); the India Centre for Human Rights and Law in Mumbai, India; and SOS-Racisme and GISTI in Paris, France. Susan has also assisted Mumbai advocate Maharukh Adenwalla in writing a book entitled, *Child Sexual Abuse and the Law* (ICHRL 2000). She was also a co-leader of the Amnesty International chapter at the University of Chicago. Susan is honored to be representing FEZANA and hopes to learn how FEZANA can better serve other communities in need.

MITRA MEHR was born in Tehran Iran and immigrated to the United States with her family in 1982. She received a B.A. in History from Brown University and a J.D. from the University of Pennsylvania. She practices corporate law in New York. Mitra has been active with the Zoroastrian communities in Boston and Philadelphia and recently spoke at the FEZANA conference in Chicago. Mitra also participated in the 2001 World Zoroastrian Organization Conference in Houston. Mitra's pro-bono activities include legal representation of the homeless, the indigent and HIV-infected persons with respect to housing and benefits issues. Other activities include tutoring ESL to adults and working with the defender's association in Philadelphia in connection with children's' right issues.

JEHAN PANTHAKI was born in Mhow, India. He holds a Bachelors degree in Finance from the University of Maryland and a Masters in Management from Oxford University in England. Jehan is a board member of ZAMWI and serves as a youth liaison with FEZANA for DC-area Zoroastrians. Jehan is a practicing priest who is actively involved with Zoroastrian participation in interfaith activities in Washington, D.C. He currently works for the European Department of International Monetary Fund (IMF). By attending this conference, among other things, Jehan hopes to gain first-hand knowledge of the nature of work being performed by NGOs at the vortex of societies afflicted by war.

TENAZ DUBASH was born in Calcutta, India and immigrated to the US in 1982 with her family. She has a Bachelors in Human Development and Family Studies from Cornell University and a Masters degree in Television/Radio & Film from the Newhouse School of Communications at Syracuse University. She has over seven years of television production experience. Tenaz has used her experience in the television industry to produce two independent films aimed at creating greater awareness of Zoroastrianism in the United States. One of those films, *In the Footsteps of our Forefathers*, involved travel to Iran and filming there under difficult circumstances. Tenaz has also produced a pilot for Indian television called *Our Servants, Our Sister*, a program that analyzes caste and class systems in India from a female perspective. She is very excited to be representing Zoroastrians as part of this meeting and hopes to use her film-making and media skills in furthering the cause of societies emerging from conflict.

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