

PEACE PROGRAMME
Steering Committee Meeting
(Barcelona, 4-5 February 2004)

Record of the meeting

The following members of the Steering Committee were present: M. Hassassian, Gianni Vaggi, Annick Suzor-Weiner, Monica Margarit, Radwan Barakat. Professor Jan Peters was represented by Mr. R. Vermeulen. Professor Rami Hamdallah informed that last minute difficulties of travel rendered it impossible for him to attend. Professor Luc Francois sent excuses because of conflicts with previous commitments. Professor D. Chitoran attended the meeting in his capacity as advisor to the PEACE Programme Office at UNESCO.

The meeting was statutory (6 of the 10 members were present. It adopted the draft agenda (attached) and proceeded to examining its items.

Item 1: Information on the current situation of Palestinian universities.

Professor M. Hassassian presented briefly the current situation of Palestinian higher education institutions, emphasizing in particular the serious financial difficulties they are facing, because funding by the Palestinian National Authority and from foreign sources has declined. At the same time, revenues from tuition fees are not coming in, because of the deteriorating situation of students and their families. The universities continue to face difficulties concerning the free movement of staff and students to campuses, which does not allow the universities to carry on their activities normally. Nevertheless, since June 2003, there have been no complete closures of universities and they could conclude the 2002/2003 academic year and start the new one.

He further emphasized the great expectations that the Palestinian Universities place in international cooperation and in the support of the international academic community.

The members of the Committee appreciated the information and asked Professor Hassassian to prepare a comprehensive document on the current situation of Palestinian Higher Education, with special reference to their priority needs and the way international cooperation - facilitated by the PEACE Programme - could help meet them. The document should be ready as soon as possible so as to be made available for the envisaged International Conference to be held in Bethlehem in

May 2004 and to be included on the PEACE Web site at UNESCO, together with updated entries on the Palestinian universities.

Item 2: Information on new developments concerning the PEACE Programme.

The members of the Steering Committee expressed thanks to HRH Prince Talal Abdul Aziz bin Al Saud, President of AGFUND, for the annual contribution of \$50,000 made to PEACE. In keeping with the proposal submitted to HRH, the allocation, which will be transferred to the PEACE Bank account at the Arab Bank in Paris, will be used for the PEACE Scholarship Scheme (see discussion on the Scheme below).

Item 3: Cooperation with the European Commission. Professors Gianni Vaggi and Suzor-Weiner informed on contacts and discussions held in Brussels with relevant units of the European Commission. Their attitude towards PEACE was positive and wanted more information about its activities. At the same time, they indicated the on-going EC programmes to which PEACE member universities, including the Palestinian ones could apply for possible funding. Ms. Monica Margarit presented technical information on the rules and procedures to follow in order to secure approval of projects under the various programmes for which Palestinian universities qualify.

Several potential projects were discussed (a “mobility” project possibly aimed at building up expertise in international cooperation at Palestinian universities, the Pavia/Siena Project on International Cooperation, Development and Innovation in Palestine, etc.). “Joint venture” projects, for which the deadline for submission is December 2004, should be prepared. Monica Margarit, Gianni Vaggi and Suzor-Weiner, agreed to pursue the elaboration of projects in these and other areas, working in close cooperation with Palestinian universities.

The members of the Committee supported the idea of elaborating a special Avicenna sub project for Palestinian universities, (cf. the draft proposal submitted by the PEACE Office in Paris).

It was agreed to further develop the contacts re-established with the relevant units of the EC and to keep them constantly informed on developments of the PEACE Programme, including the preparations of the International Conference of 8-9 May in Bethlehem, to which the EC should be invited at the appropriate level. It was decided that, since members of the Steering Committee go often to Brussels for other purposes, they could use these opportunities to further develop the established

contacts so as to be able to use of the relevant programmes of the EC to promote academic cooperation with and support for the Palestinian universities. It was not considered necessary to send a PEACE delegation to the EC in the immediate future.

Item 4: Cooperation with UNESCO. Professor D. Chitoran informed on relations between the PEACE Programme and UNESCO. He pointed out that the lines of action aimed at reinforcing the links with and the support of UNESCO presented in the letter addressed by the President of PEACE to the Director General of UNESCO were well received and should be pursued, notably, the scholarship scheme, the Avicenna Project and the envisaged pilot project for Palestinian universities within the framework of the Academics across Borders initiative. The members of the Committee were of the opinion that earlier action taken jointly with UNESCO in the field of water management should be resumed. It is through increased cooperation with various UNESCO units that the problem of the PEACE Programme Office at UNESCO could also be solved on a long term basis.

Item 5: Preparation of the International Conference and of the 6th Session of the General Assembly of PEACE.

The Committee devoted the largest part of its deliberations to this item. It was agreed that an important international event, organized in Palestine, could provide the proper framework for the real re-launching of the PEACE Programme. The members of the Committee decided therefore to convene an International Conference on Palestinian Higher Education, to be held jointly with the 6th Session of the General Assembly of PEACE, in **Bethlehem** on **8-9 May 2004**. The arrival of the participants is expected for Friday, 7 May, the International Conference will take place on Saturday, 8 May and the General Assembly Session on Sunday, 9 May 2004.

The members of the Committee discussed at length both the dates and the venue of the Conference. They were of the opinion that a momentum has been attained in the development of PEACE, which should not be missed. Several previous meetings have been postponed. They considered that a special effort should be made in order to prepare it well and to hold it at the proposed dates. On the other hand, holding the Conference in Palestine, according to the provisions of the PEACE By-Laws, is both a necessity and a challenge for PEACE. The members of the Committee felt confident that the International Conference could be held in Bethlehem. Professor Hassassian assured that Bethlehem University and its administrative staff have the capacity to handle all problems related to accommodation and meals, to local

transportation and to overall secretariat and logistic arrangements for the Conference. As in the past, the participants will be asked to cover expenses related to their travel and stay.

As an emergency alternative, in case conditions will not permit it, the Conference will be held in Paris, at UNESCO, or at one of the Parisian member-universities.

The Committee discussed and approved the theme of the Conference: **University Cooperation for the Progress of Civil Society in Palestine**. Three panel discussions will be held during the Conference, devoted respectively to: 1. *Priorities for the development of Palestinian Higher education*; 2. *University cooperation for the institutional development of Palestinian universities*; and 3. *The role of higher education in the advancement of civil society in Palestine*.

Preliminary proposals for main speakers and contributors were made. This will be continued through direct contacts with member universities and representatives of the invited organisations/institutions. Particular attention was paid to securing wide participation in the International Conference and securing the quorum for the General Assembly session. The members of the Committee assumed individual tasks for the preparation of the two meetings.

It was agreed to ask, as in the past for the sponsorship and financial support of the Conference by UNESCO and the European Commission.

The draft Agenda of the International Conference and of the General Assembly are presented in Annex 1.

Item 6: Plan of Action of the PEACE Programme for the 2004-2005 period

Presenting a solid, but realistic Plan of Action at the next Session of the General Assembly is essential for the renewal of PEACE. The Steering Committee discussed various activities and projects that could be included in the Draft Plan of Action of the PEACE Programme, to be submitted to the 6th Session of the General Assembly. Among the activities to be included in the Plan, the following were emphasized:

Peace Programme Scholarship Scheme for the academic years 2004/2005 and 2005/2006.

The Scholarship Scheme will remain the first priority of the PEACE Programme, particularly following the approval of the \$50,000 annual allocation by HRH Prince Talal, President of AGFUND, for that purpose. The members of the Committee re-examined the Guidelines for the Scholarship Scheme that had been prepared by Professor Radwan Barakat and proposed certain changes meant to render the Scheme more flexible and efficient. It was agreed that an effort be made to identify a number of Palestinian candidates as soon as possible (possibly before the Bethlehem Conference) so that they could be placed at member-universities beginning with the next academic year. Professor Barakat, with the help of Professor Baramki, Counsellor of the Ministry of Education and Honorary member of the Steering Committee, will follow this action. A revised version of the Guidelines of the Scholarship Scheme will be prepared and submitted for approval to the 6th Session of the General Assembly in Bethlehem.

Institutional Development

Several priority needs in this field were pointed out:

- Strengthening the international relations offices of Palestinian universities so as to be able to make better use of the opportunities open up through international cooperation
- Building up on-line library links between Palestinian universities and extending the links to PEACE member-universities in Europe
- Making optimum use of the Avicenna Project for the benefit of all Palestinian universities. For that purpose, a meeting of the Palestinian universities with the Avicenna Knowledge Centre at Al Quds Open University headed by Dr. Hadali, will be organized prior to the Bethlehem Conference. A presentation of the ways in which PEACE member-universities could help Avicenna will be made in Panel 2 at that Conference.
- Pilot Project within the framework of the Academics across Borders initiative. It was considered that all components of the AAB initiative (the university volunteers, the expatriate nationals-TOKTEN- and the Open Educational Resources for e-learning and the free use of ODL and other ICTs-based facilities) are well tuned to the needs of Palestinian universities and should be supported by PEACE.

Academic Programmes

The members of the Committee underlined that the renewal of PEACE should also involve resuming some of the academic programmes that were successful in the

past, but had to be interrupted because of the deteriorating situation in the Palestinian Territories. This is the case of the Mathematics in Economics Master Programme launched by a consortium of French universities, the Water management Project, The Law Centre at Birzeit University, etc.

At the same time, new programmes should be prepared and launched, including the *Master's programme in International Cooperation, Development and Innovation in Palestine, carried on between the universities of Bir Zeit, Nablus, Siena and Pavia*. The members of the Steering Committee undertook to discuss possibilities to elaborate such projects with their own universities and with other member-universities. The practice of setting up *consortia of PEACE member-universities* that could pool resources in order to prepare and implement such programmes should be resumed.

Item 7: Organizational matters. Under this item, the Committee approved steps to provide secretariat support to the two offices of PEACE at UNESCO in Paris and in Ramallah, at the Ministry of Education. Such support should not entail too heavy expenses. Preferably, part-time secretaries should be recruited, who would work for the two offices according to needs.

Item 8: Funding. The Committee did not have time to discuss the matter of funding in detail. It was decided that a full financial report be prepared for the General Assembly, together with proposals to secure the payment of the membership fees and of additional funding from various sources.

Professor Hassassian thanked Monica Margarit for the excellent conditions created to the participants to hold a very efficient and productive meeting. He asked her to convey thanks on behalf of PEACE to the University of Barcelona for hosting the meeting.

He concluded the meeting with a warm appeal to all members present to make a special effort for the preparation of the International Conference and of the General Assembly meeting. The two events provide a proper framework to set PEACE on a new course of renewal. They need to be turned into a full success.