

Plan to use comics to bridge Asia, Europe gap

Asef okays use of medium to carry message of mutual understanding

BY BHAGYASHREE GAREKAR

TO AN outfit trying to draw the people of Asia and Europe closer, comics seem the right weapon to deploy as opinions polarise over the cartoons satirising Prophet Muhammad.

The board of governors of the Singapore-based Asia-Europe Foundation (Asef) last Friday approved a project that identifies comics as a new medium to carry its message of mutual understanding to the public and may lead to the publication of the first Asia-Europe comic.

It is to be one of the many projects that Asef, the nine-year-old progeny of the Asia-Europe Meeting (Asem), will undertake over the next few years in its mission to foster inter-continental closeness.

Asem, which some have labelled Europe's answer to the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation forum, groups the 10 Asean countries plus Asian dialogue partners China, Japan and South Korea with the 25-nation European Union.

It is a process of informal dialogue and cooperation between the two continents which produce half of the world's GDP.

The backdrop to this year's meeting of Asef governors — eminent personalities, diplomats and senior officials representing the 38 member countries and a representative from the European Commission — was the flaming cartoon row

which erupted when some European dailies published cartoons of the Prophet.

About 50 have died and some European embassies were burnt down in violence sparked off by anti-cartoon demonstrators in Asia and the Middle East.

Discussion on the issue was not on the agenda, Asef officials said, but the organisation charged with promoting cultural, intellectual and people-to-people contacts between the two regions could hardly ignore it.

"We discussed it during the Asef meeting that a flag of one of the member states of Asef state was burnt and being trampled upon in the country of another Asef member. It means that there is not enough understanding," Poland's Ambassador to Singapore and its representative on the Asef board, Mr Boguslaw Majewski, told The Straits Times.

Mr Paul Brouwer, Dutch representative and previous chairman of the Asef board, said: "The feeling is if we can help out in this case, and also for a better understanding of various positions, then of course we shall not refrain."

The current Asef chairman, Indonesian Sastrohandoyo Wiryono, said: "We want to be constructive, not join the debate. We look at it as a challenge, how do we cope with it? We try to be helpful to the Asem process."

The chairmanship rotates between Asian and European members by turn.

But why comics?

"It is a universal language, understood by everyone easily," said Mr Sastrohandoyo.

Said Mr Majewski: "It can prove to be an excellent educational tool for all those confused by what is happening

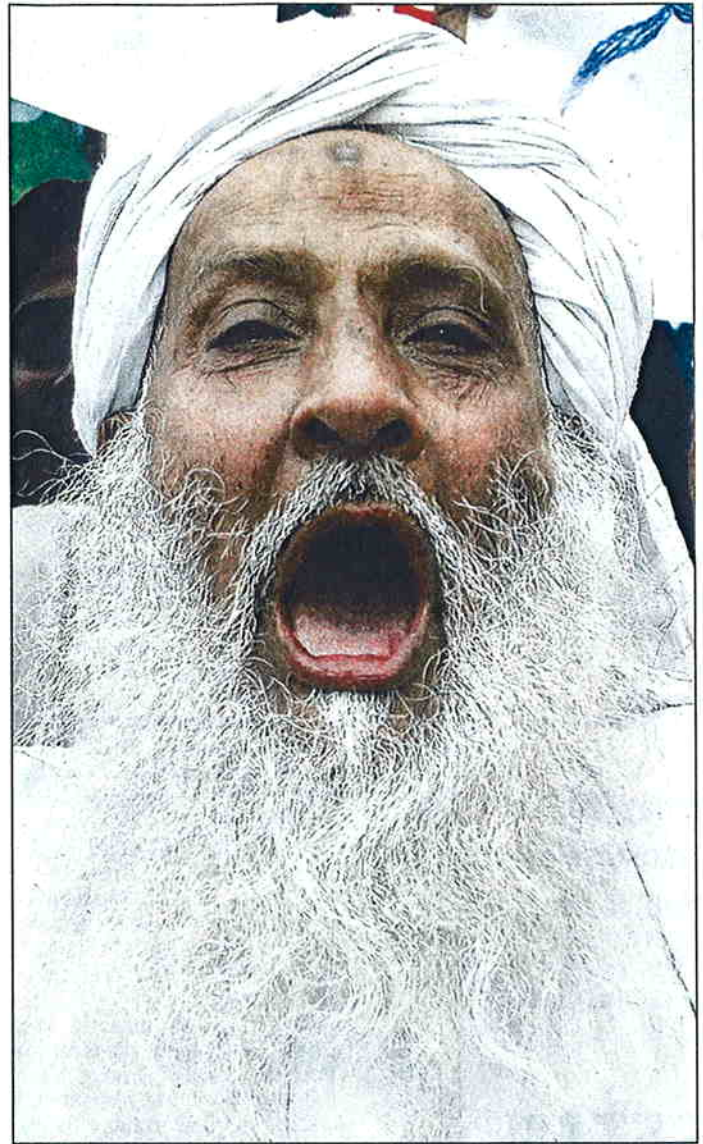


PHOTO: AP

HEAR ME ROAR: A supporter of a Pakistani religious party chanting anti-Denmark slogans to condemn the Prophet Muhammad cartoons. The comics proposal actually predates the cartoons row.

and explain it to them through the art and understanding of people like them.

"We are now calling for proposals. The best project, we hope, would be produced and distributed throughout Asia and Europe."

China's representative and Foreign Ministry official Chen Xu said: "I believe this kind of activity will reach the ground. That is very useful."

Admitted Mr Sastrohandoyo: "In the beginning, we did have mixed feelings. Can Asef as a very serious organisation be engaged in comics?"

Those doubts seem to have been resolved, with the board giving it the go-ahead. The comic project actually predates the cartoon row and had been conceived to tackle hairy topics such as how societies in

Asia and Europe cope with globalisation, deal with immigration, attract talents, etc.

Asef officials are also hopeful the cartoon row might add heft to the socio-cultural cooperation within Asem. Political and economic cooperation traditionally receive more priority from the governments.

Another project aiding cultural understanding was the inaugural inter-faith dialogue held in Bali last summer, said Mr Brouwer. A second round is coming up in July, organised by Cyprus and Malaysia.

"That is typically a meeting where discussions on the cartoon controversy can take place," he said.

bhagya@sph.com.sg

COMMON SENSE TO SELF-CENSOR, REVIEW PAGE 17

DANISH PAPER SAYS SORRY FOR TURMOIL

DUBAI: A Saudi-owned pan-Arab newspaper yesterday printed a full-page apology from Jyllands-Posten, the Danish daily that first published cartoons of Prophet Muhammad, unleashing a wave of fury by Muslims worldwide.

The statement printed in Asharq al-Awasat was the strongest expression of regret yet from the paper, but stopped short of explicitly saying sorry for the cartoons' publication.

Instead, it apologised for the turmoil caused in their aftermath. "These drawings apparently hurt millions of Muslims around the world, so we now offer our apology and deep regret for what happened because it is far from the paper's intention," said the statement titled "Apology" in big bold letters and addressed to Muslims.

It was signed by the paper's editor-in-chief Carsten Juste and was also posted in Arabic on Jyllands-Posten's website under a link titled "A new formulation for the apology".

The statement said: "We did not set out to offend or insult any religion. We apologise for being misunderstood and reiterate that we did not intend to target anyone...I hope this clears the misunderstanding and God bless."

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE

RADICAL ISLAMIC LEADERS ARRESTED

ISLAMABAD: Police yesterday raided offices and homes of dozens of radical Islamic leaders, putting several under house arrest and detaining hundreds of their associates in a bid to foil a rally in the capital, officials said.

Mr Qazi Hussain Ahmad, the chief of a six-party coalition, was placed under house arrest in Lahore. Other senior leaders were either arrested or asked not to leave their homes in Islamabad, where the rally was to be held yesterday.

Coalition spokesman Mian Maqsood said "hundreds" of Islamic leaders had been arrested. But Interior Minister Aftab Khan Sherpao said only about two dozen had been detained to stop the latest protest against the publication of Prophet Muhammad cartoons in Europe and elsewhere.

ASSOCIATED PRESS

PROTEST OVER CARTOON IN STUDENT PAPER

OTTAWA: A student newspaper at Canada's University of Toronto has drawn protests after publishing a cartoon that depicts the Prophet Muhammad embracing Jesus.

The caricature, drawn by a local student, shows the two religious figures aboard a floating swan entering a "tunnel of tolerance".

The Strand newspaper published the cartoon next to an editorial about a dozen Danish cartoons of the Prophet which sparked outrage and violence by Muslims worldwide in recent weeks.

Mr Nick Ragaz, editor of The Strand, acknowledged the uproar on the newspaper's website late on Friday, but refused to apologise for publishing the cartoon.

The controversy comes amid heightened tensions at the school between Jewish and Arab student groups.

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE

ITALIAN MINISTER QUILTS AFTER PROVOCATION

ROME: A right-wing Italian minister, whose action in wearing a T-shirt with a Prophet Muhammad caricature was blamed for deadly riots in Libya on Friday, has resigned.

Reforms Minister Roberto Calderoli of the Northern League party quit on Saturday after Premier Silvio Berlusconi demanded that he step down immediately.

The government, meanwhile, scrambled to repair relations with Tripoli, a major supplier of oil and natural gas.

ASSOCIATED PRESS