



CULTURES & CIVILISATIONS DIALOGUE

“9th ASEF Talks on the Hill”

Pressing freedoms: Managing creative liberties in a multi-faith and multi-cultural context

Cyprus
29 June – 1 July

BACKGROUND

The 'Cultures & Civilisations Dialogue' programme <http://www.civdialogue.asef.org> was established in 2003 by the ASEF Department for Intellectual Exchange with the realisation that many **cultural and civilisational issues** need to be addressed in promoting greater understanding between the two regions of Asia and Europe. This programme facilitates leaders of civil society and government meeting, interacting and engaging with one another and with audiences in the opposite region.

The “Talks on the Hill” series under this programme brings together 15 expert activists, journalists, academics and policymakers to discuss and brainstorm issues of pertinence to the two regions in an open, frank and intense setting. For this reason, “Talks on the Hill” are closed to the media (*please see our Ground Rules for further details*). **The aim of this meeting series is to contribute to a better understanding of key issues on the topic and by doing so, to come up with real and useful policy-oriented recommendations that may be disseminated to the various governments of the ASEM process.**

On the occasion of the First ASEM Interfaith Dialogue conference (21st/22nd July 2005, Bali Indonesia) the 6th ASEF Talks on the Hill meeting was organised on the topic of “**Countering Imported Conflicts Peacefully: The Role of Interfaith Dialogue**,” from the 17th-19th of July. This meeting brought together 17 high-level individuals for two days of intensive discussions on the role of Interfaith Dialogue in countering a growing number of conflicts between groups and individuals of different religions, which have some elements that could be considered “imported” from conflicts in other countries. The major themes and findings of the ‘Talks on the Hill’ were presented during the first session of the ASEM conference 4th Working Group on ‘The Role of Religion in Building Harmony in Society. This report was well received and contributed to the framing of the Bali Declaration (22 July 2005).

This 9th Talks on the Hill meeting will be organised to complement the Second ASEM Interfaith Dialogue which will be held in Cyprus from the 3rd-5th of July 2006. Immediately preceding the Second ASEM Interfaith Dialogue, the 9th ASEF Talks on the Hill meeting will be an opportunity to discuss the aspects of press and creative freedoms in detail, within the framework of promoting dialogue between individuals and communities in multi-cultural and multi-faith societies.

CONCEPT

The 9th ASEF Talks on the Hill meeting will bring together 15 experts from Asia and Europe, representing diverse perspectives, professions and from various cultures and religious backgrounds for a two-day brainstorming debate.

Balancing the freedom of the media and artistic creativity can be a very difficult and arduous task especially when approaching topics related to race, religion and the culture of certain communities. On numerous occasions in both Asia and Europe, artistic creations and media reports (including art exhibitions, plays, news articles and novels) that have been seen to be controversial or insulting to a particular community have resulted in deep offence among certain segments of the population, severe clashes, arrests, threats and even death.

On one hand, the freedom of the media and artistic freedom is a strongly defended principle in most societies – and in fact, a cornerstone of democracy. Art has traditionally been seen as a space of neutrality beyond the boundaries of government, and indeed, most governments are reluctant to involve themselves in the everyday running and affairs of the media and/or artists.

Some of the topics that will be addressed during this meeting include:

1> **The major issues and experiences of this topic, and the situation in the various countries of ASEM.** Can there be an international dialogue on issues that are so intrinsically tied to particular religions, ethnic groups or communities? Is there a possibility for a harmonisation of ideas that are deemed acceptable and unacceptable? What is the distinction between free speech and free press and artistic creation? Can international organisations or regional groupings have a space in defining the future of this dynamic – much as they have done in the fields of human rights and labour laws?

2> **Defining the role of the government: legal systems, blasphemy and censorship**
Despite ideological support for the freedom of the press and creativity, most countries have laws against expressions of racist, violent and/or as otherwise defined insulting and provocative sentiments. However, in many cases, biases may sometimes result in more “protection” for certain religions, historical narratives and communities than others.

In a situation of conflict, what is the role of the government? Most governments profess to be uninvolved in art and press, but they invariably get drawn in as protests and threats erupt.

3> **Now what? Reconciliation and moving forward positively:**
When tensions arise or conflicts erupt due to deep-seated feelings of insult or anger, wide chasms can develop between various segments of a population and even between countries. Once these hostilities set in, it can be difficult to prevent further tensions and often lead to prolonged difficulties between certain groups.

Often, issues that strain up the delicate relationship between two or more communities can very quickly take on political overtones and morph into a larger “clash of civilisations.” How can this be prevented? What are the possible avenues for reconciliation? Who are the actors that should involve themselves in this? Participants will be invited to share their personal experiences in analysing the various models of reconciliation and their application in the various countries of ASEM.

EXPECTED OUTCOMES

In meeting the objective of serving as a mechanism to inform and deliver civil society recommendations to the governments of ASEM, the **final report** of this meeting will be tailored towards real policy issues and will be disseminated widely to the relevant Ministries and agencies. The final report will also be posted **online** on the dedicated Cultures & Civilisations Dialogue website at <http://www.civdialogue.asef.org>. Eventually, the material from this “Talks on the Hill” will also contribute towards the ASEF annual **Cultures & Civilisations Dialogue publication**.

As was done last year, it would be good for the major themes and findings of this meeting to be presented during the relevant working session of the ASEM Interfaith Dialogue meeting. This will enable the participants of the ASEM meeting to directly discuss and contribute towards the subject as well as further deepen the topic at hand.

TARGET PARTICIPANT GROUP:

There will be 15 participants at the meeting, including legal experts, policymakers, activists, academics and journalists.

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