Conference promotes Asia-Europe ties

BARCELONA — Every sector, agency and organisation in Asia and Europe should work to enhance the relationship between the two continents, concluded participants at a conference called Connecting the Civil Society of Asia and Europe, held in Barcelona last week.

The conference, which gathered academic, business, cultural, governmental and labour leaders from 23 Asian and European countries, allowed participants to exchange information and offer proposals for the fifth Asia Europe Meeting (ASEM 5), which will be held in Hà Nội this October.

The conference was divided workshops, which each focused on a different issue.

According to the participants of a workshop called Dialogue of Civilisations, Interfaith Dialogue and Cultures, one of the greatest challenges facing Asia and Europe is how to address differences in religions, ethnicity and culture, particularly in terms of the rift between radical Islam and the West, and how to transform global diversity from a weakness into a strength.

The participants also reached a consensus that Asian and European civil society should work beyond the governmental level to broaden co-operation by involving all elements of civil society, including NGOs, advocacy groups, the media, scholars and intellectuals, artists, environmentalists and educators.

In order to achieve this, the participants advocated the use of culture and art in resolving conflicts. The participants cited the Phoenix project, which gave Israeli and Palestinian children an opportunity to take part in an artistic project that eased tensions and created a sense of community among the participants.

The workshop also emphasised the role of dialogue, which should not be seen as only a means to resolve conflict but also a way to build shared values that lead to a new common civilisation, participants said. The participants also recognised that the full potential of civil society in Asia and Europe had yet to be tapped.

Participants in the Education, Academic Co-operation and Science and Technology workshop pointed out that co-ordination between academic networks and research networks needed to be enhanced and that both academic and research networks should be strengthened.

According workshop members, the business community should be engaged more actively in not only funding but also identifying industry needs.

The networks, in turn, could provide consultative services to companies doing business in other regions.

Participants in a workshop entitled Environment and Urbanisation, on the other hand, recommended that ASEM acknowledge the role that youth could play in creating a civil society for the future, offering Norway and Sweden as examples.

The participants suggested that ASEM members should properly manage tourism in cities and handle the goals of cultural and social integration of immigrant groups.

Participants in other workshops discussed hot-button issues like human rights, trade, development co-operation, migration, security, and international relations.

The conference was co-organised by the Asia Europe Foundation, Casa Asia, the International Institute for Asian Studies, and the Japan Centre for International Exchange. — VNS