



The ARS Contribution to the UN/NGO Conference

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Not many of us know to what extent the ARS is involved in international humanitarian affairs. As an accredited non-governmental organization (NGO) having consultative status within the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) of the United Nations, the ARS was invited to take part in the planning as well as to participate in the 55th Annual DPI/NGO Conference, held September 9-10, 2002, at the UN headquarters in New York. More than 700 NGOs and close to 2,400 delegates attended this Conference. This year's main topic was entitled "Rebuilding Societies Emerging from Conflict: A Shared Responsibility". It was of special relevance to Armenia and Artsakh, still struggling for recognition of its hard earned independence and sovereignty.

As young members of the Armenian community, we had the privilege of being part of the ARS delegation. In the course of these three days, we attended many conferences and workshops, where distinguished speakers presented key examples of NGO involvement in dealing with conflict stricken societies. Among the issues addressed — re-establishing of the rule of law as a key factor of attaining democracy, setting priorities and coordinating efforts in restoring social services in post conflict areas, as well as the major challenges to rebuilding economies — were discussed in depth.

Alongside these main sessions, various midday workshops were also organized. Although many were related to important Armenian issues, conflicts in our schedule allowed us to attend only two of them:

"Working Toward Reconciliation in the Caucasus" featured Lady Caroline Cox, Deputy Speaker of the British House of Lords, who spoke of the conflict and reconciliation process of Nagorno Karabagh, present day Artsakh Republic. The Baroness mentioned the insufficient humanitarian aid and assistance for displaced Armenians within the conflict zone. She stated that Azeri interests

inhibited UNHCR and UNICEF involvement in addressing the needs of the region's vulnerable Armenian populations, notably refugees and internally displaced adults and children. She emphasized the pressing need for NGO involvement in the areas of physical and mental health care, housing and educational projects, reconstruction of basic infrastructures, etc.

The second workshop, "From Less Than Zero: Opportunities in Rebuilding Economies" was sponsored by the ARS. The panel featured NGO and community representatives who provided insights on ways to revamp economic activity, education, health care and other social services. Maral Chalian, from the UAF (United Armenian Fund, a coalition of seven leading Armenian-American charitable and religious organizations, including the ARS), informed the participants about the Fund's accomplishments in providing humanitarian assistance to Armenia. Dr. Sevag Avakian, clinical director of the ARS "Mother & Child" Health Center in Akhurian — located within the 1988 earthquake devastated zone — focused on present-day problems in Armenia's health care system. He presented the "Mother & Child" Center as a salient example of how NGOs can successfully provide necessary assistance needed to meet the basic requirements of disaster stricken communities. Other speakers included Kristina Kazarian, author of *New Philanthropy Benchmarking* and Fred Kirschnit of the Catholic Medical Mission Board.

We are indebted to the Armenian Relief Society for allowing us to be part of this experience as delegates of a world-class humanitarian organization. Not only did this conference bring us face to face with the many hardships that conflict stricken societies confront today, but it made us realize the importance of the crucial role played by international NGOs in restoring and defending fundamental human rights.