

"I fear that without a concerted struggle for peacefulness, we are heading towards a Third World War... Free communication offers a chance at peace building"
- Prince El Hassan bin Talal of Jordan

Media freedom and security, terrorism, Iraq, Central Asia's future and North Korea were among an intriguing mix of topics discussed by a wide cross-section of journalists, politicians, defence and security experts, academics and business people at the Third Eurasian Media Forum (EAMF) on April 22-24, 2004. The forum, held in Almaty, Kazakhstan - through which passed the once great Silk Road linking Orient and Occident - brought together over 400 representatives from about 40 countries in Asia, Europe, the Middle East, North America, Australasia and Africa.

The conference took place amid rising public disquiet over the bloody aftermath of the 2003 invasion of Iraq, increased acts of international terrorism and the Islam-West divide, as well as a disturbing rise in the number of journalists killed in pursuit of their work.

At the end of the conference, which started with a reference to a "collision between civilisations", it was announced that the Fourth Eurasian Media Forum would be held in Kazakhstan in 2005. Until we all comprehend that the collision between civilisations and violence is not a result of the power of one religion or weakness of another... until the main structural problem of the modern world, the fast-growing gap in quality of life, is resolved, the world will be doomed to repeatedly act out the same scenario," Kazakhstan's President Nursultan Nazarbayev said in a welcome address.

Jordan's Prince El Hassan bin Talal, in a video message, said: "There are 40 conflicts at this moment all over the world. They are so-called low-intensity conflicts. Historically, it has taken very little to tip us over the edge of war. I fear that without a concerted struggle for peacefulness, we are heading towards a Third World War." "A free media is not only about the official media organ. Free communication offers a chance at peace building," he added.

The presence of two prominent US strategists, Richard Holbrooke and Richard Perle from either side of the mainstream American political divide, gave added weight to the 2004 conference, which was dominated by strong passions, some fervently held positions and direct talking.

Some of the most notable exchanges involved either, or both, of the Americans with questioners such as a bureau chief for the Qatar-based television station al-Jazeera, which has become an outlet for recorded messages, and sometimes film footage, said to have come from leaders of the al-Qaeda terrorist network. As at the 2003 Forum, the issue of translating post-Cold War freedoms into a credible free press in countries once under Soviet domination was discussed.

Kazakhstan's President Nazarbayev took the 2004 meeting by surprise by announcing, at the opening, plans to drop a controversial draft law further regulating the country's media. Ambassador Jan Kubis, Secretary-General of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), welcomed the President's decision, saying treatment of the media and individual journalists provided an important indicator of the democratic health of a society.

"A well-informed and empowered pluralistic civil society and transparent government, helped in this by independent professional, responsible journalists, is the most effective way of ensuring efficient responses to contemporary challenges for peace, stability and prosperity, based on strong public support," Ambassador Kubis said.

Dariga Nazarbayeva, chairperson of Kazakhstan's Khabar News Agency and the driving force behind the Forum, said in an opening address: "The issue of media control, the media's role and freedom of speech has gone beyond academic discussions. It has become one of the most urgent items on many countries' national agenda."

"History has posed us a challenge - to find the balance between protection from terrorism and freedom of speech," she said.

The Forum's stated aims are to promote the concept of Eurasia, to encourage the development of its mass media, to help a professional exchange of views on fresh challenges faced by the media and to build a continuing dialogue between East and West.

Independent broadcaster and journalist Riz Khan chaired the 2004 conference, as he did in 2002 and 2003. Leading delegates at the 2004 Forum included Jean Fournet, NATO's assistant Secretary-General (Public Diplomacy); Johann Fritz, director of the International Press Institute; Stephen Claypole, Chairman, DMA Media Ltd., UK; Charles Hodson of CNN; Ian Bremmer, president of the Eurasia Group, US; Toshiyuki Sato of Japan's NHK; Sheila Gunn, freelance political journalist and former press-secretary of former British Prime Minister John Major; Ariel Cohen, US-based Heritage Foundation; Zafar Siddiqi, chairman and CEO of CNBC, UAE; David Astley, Secretary-General of the Asia-Pacific Broadcasting Union; Zeyno Baran, director of international security and energy programs at the US-based Nixon Center; Gunter Knabe, Deutsche Welle's diplomatic correspondent for Asia/Islam World; Mohamed Galadari, editor-in-chief of the Khaleej Times, UAE; Rodney Pinder, director of the International News Safety Institute (INSI), Belgium, and many others.

The conference was organised with the support of Khabar News Agency of Kazakhstan; Eurasia House International; The International Institute for Modern Politics, Kazakhstan; the Eurasia Centre at The Judge Institute of Management Studies, Cambridge University; NATO; CNN; the Vienna-based International Press Institute; International Journalist Unions Confederation; Associated Press Television News; the Information Telegraph Agency of Russia (ITAR-TASS); American Chamber of Commerce in Kazakhstan, The British-Kazakh Society, the International Academy of Television Arts and Sciences (IATAS); Journalist Unions of Russia and Kazakhstan; Kazakhstan TV and Radio Broadcasters' Association.

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