

Newsletter for July 2013

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UN Audience Invited to World Esperanto Congress

In parallel with the 23rd Session of the Human Rights Council, an “Expert Meeting on the Rights and Security of Religious Minorities” took place on 6 and 7 June in the Office of the High Commissioner of the UN for Human Rights, in Geneva. The meeting was chaired by Rita Izsák, head of minority affairs at the UN. Representatives of the Universal Esperanto Association Verena Graf and Stefano Keller attended the event. In addition to several representatives of member-states, numbers of human rights specialists, lawyers, UN reporters, and NGO representatives were in attendance.

Following presentations on basic concepts, various specific cases and situations were described. On the matter of rights and security in religious affairs, the reality can be complicated by the question of whether one is dealing with relations between members of a religious group and the state, or between the religious community or leadership and its members, and also whether one is dealing with a state religion. Freedom of practice and situations concerning marriage and conversion were addressed. The approach to the problem can be even more complicated if several different indicators of identity are involved – ethnic, religious, or linguistic identities.

Also involved is the effect of “labelling”, that is, the name that the members of a given minority receive and who determines their belonging to a minority group. This label may be perceived as something positive (for example “religious community” is more positive than “sect”), or negative (“minority” and thus of “lower status” than the others). Sometimes minority status can privilege citizens in their relations with the majority.

A representative of the International Baha’i Community discussed these issues with the representatives of UEA and clearly expressed her sympathy with Esperanto; Baha’is favour using a neutral language for mutual international understanding.

Towards the end of the meeting, Stefano Keller, as final speaker, reacted to the way in which the event developed, regretting that it occurred only in English, without interpreters and without the possibility of using any other UN language. He pointed out that, as a result, numbers of people were shut out of the meeting. He called for serious consideration of the language aspect of community life, advocating greater attention to this important component of human rights.

He concluded his speech by inviting the participants to attend the World Congress of Esperanto taking place in Reykjavik in July (20-27 July), where the topic of “communicative justice” will be discussed.

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