

Peter Van Tuijl, Executive Director of the Global Partnership for the Prevention of Armed Conflict (GPPAC) granted the following exclusive interview to The Mongolian Observer. He was in Mongolia for the Ulaanbaatar Process roundtable. In the photo right, he is seen with Mongolian Deputy Foreign Minister N. Oyundari at the opening of the Ulaanbaatar Process roundtable.



"PEOPLE WANT PEACE"

What is GPPAC and what does it do?

GPPAC is a global network of civil society organizations focused on confidence and peace-building. We have several hundred members in different parts of the world, they are active in their own environment promoting peace, reconciliation, many of our members promote dialogue processes in their countries, communities, and between countries. We make conflict analysis, we communicate concerns to governments, regional organizations, to the United Nations, so we try to create a civil-society voice that promotes peace and prevents armed conflicts.

Is GPPAC affiliated to the United Nations? Where does its funding come from?

We have a liaison officer with the UN in New York and we have frequent interactions. Many of our members have official consultative status with the UN so it is not a problem for us to communicate with them. We are funded by various governments from the Netherlands, Belgium, Sweden, and from several private foundations such as The Rockefeller Brothers Fund. We are not very large organization, so we work on the quality of our international members' help.

In recent years we are witness to different armed conflicts and violence around the world, people are suffering and there is apparently no end to all this?

Indeed, we look at armed conflicts not only as, let's say, the problems of Af-

rica, but as a problem everywhere and certainly when it comes to the issue of violent extremism, we are also increasingly talking and engaging with authorities in Europe and in the United States. I am involved in a research project as a resource person to look at why young people from The Hague go to Syria and fight with ISIS and of course, we try to understand and try to prevent that from happening. Our West Africa network focuses on peacebuilding in countries like Cote d'Ivoire, Mali, Burkina Faso, but we are talking with them after the attack on Charlie Hebdo in Paris. We have been looking at bringing the expertise of our West African network to Paris because the communities in the suburbs of Paris is becoming a breeding ground for terrorism and extremism. These communities often come from West Africa, there are people from Togo, Cote d'Ivoire and so we want to do something positive to prevent young people from becoming violent.

Mongolia is an open society. From reliable source I have the knowledge that there have been cases among young Mongolian converts who have expressed their interest in going and fighting in say Syria, in the Middle East.

The attraction to extremism is a global phenomenon, which underlines why it is important to have a network like GPPAC, which creates a framework where people can exchange knowledge and information globally on how to deal with these issues, because there are similari-

ties as well as differences. But unfortunately there is no one solution to these difficult problems, because the grievances and motivations of the young people might be different in various parts of the world.

Mongolia is one of the focal points of GPPAC. What is the role of focal points, say Mongolia, in Asia?

The role is to bring information out about what is happening in your country or your region, and we try to be active based on the priorities, on the agendas of our local and regional members. The problem with the United Nations is that they are talking to each other in New York but they don't know enough about what's happening on the ground. In our network, we try to create within our network a structure with 15 regional networks, and often at lower levels, like here in Mongolia, focal points that function to generate information, to discuss at the regional level and then bring those priorities to the global level. This is one reason why I am here, because we agreed a couple of years ago when our North East Asia (NEA) network received a call for support to look into major issues around the Korean Peninsula, tensions between China and Japan, for example. Can the global network come in and help increase the profile of the issue, to bring more information from other regions of the world and to increase the leverage, the strength that we can have to raise these issues with the Governments and at international level. So we started to work on developing the

Ulaanbaatar Process about 5 years ago and we have worked hard for a couple of years to build the understanding, to build the constituency for it among the civil society, but also with Governments. In this respect, we have been talking with the US government, the Chinese Government, of course here in Mongolia, to create room for a civil society dialogue in NEA, because we think that we as a civil society can make a positive contribution to generating new ideas and suggestions that will help promote peace in this region. Look at the official level, the mechanisms that are there are not functioning very well, the Six Party Talks on the nuclear weapons issue on the Korean Peninsula are dead, they are not functioning. The problem is growing rather than becoming smaller, so what do we do about it? We are not suggesting that we as civil society are going to solve this alone. Of course, we will need governments to sign peace agreements, we need governments to do away with nuclear arms, but as civil society we also have a responsibility to come forward and to say what can we do to help with new ideas, suggestions, offering openings for further talks also with those parties that you might see as your enemy in this conflict.

You said that the Ulaanbaatar (UB) Process started some 5 years ago.

How far have you come in this process and where are you headed to?

We have come a long way in building a real good group of representatives from different countries in the region. One of the uniqueness of the UB Process is that we have both North Korean and South Korean participants talking to each other in a regional framework, with which I am really pleased. At the moment, I hope we can agree on trying to work towards a nuclear-weapons free zone for the region, in a way that goes much beyond the decision of Mongolia as a nuclear-weapons-free country. I hope that we can work towards peace on the Korean Peninsula, which we can say is the 'elephant in the room', and we are having interesting discussions about how we can create a regional territorial dispute settlement mechanism, because that is another line of tension in the region, and perhaps we can help to seek new innovative ways to settle disputes in order to prevent violence. Finally, based on experiences from many parts of the world, we will continue to promote the participation of women since we have

a lot of empirical evidence that shows that the participation of women helps to promote peace-building processes, and reinforce peace and security.

The present UB Process roundtable was attended also by delegations from both North and South Korea and that they are talking to each other. But how much do they see each other eye-to-eye on critical issues?

In our meetings they see each other eye-to-eye, but it is a challenge, in general to organize this conversation because there are obstacles for people from South Korea to travel to North Korea, they need permissions from their government, and vice versa. And I am very pleased that within the borders of our global network we can create a 'safe space' where people can see eye-to-eye and seriously talk to each other. That is one step but an important step in the process because if you want a dialogue the first thing you need is the opportunity to talk to each other.

We have the UB Process as well as the Ulaanbaatar Dialogue initiative to promote peace and security in North-East Asia. Do you think they can complement each other?

I definitely think they will complement each other. We have a jargon in our work where we talk about Tracks. Track 1 is government-to-government, and Track 2 is civil society to civil society interaction, and there is such a thing as Track 1.5 which is more the academics and thinkers, which is more or less the Ulaanbaatar (UB) Dialogue. The UB Dialogue is very useful where people talk more out of knowledge with each other, but that is not to say we don't know what we are talking about, since civil society is much more representative of concerns and values among civilians. So several of our participants will also attend the UB Dialogue process (The interview took place on the eve of the UB Dialogue meeting. TMO). So I am quite hopeful that the two can be complementary and can inform each other.

GPPAC has been voicing concern over growing arms spending in the region, which is fraught with the danger of jeopardizing regional peace and stability?

This is a big issue. As a matter of priority, we just saw the release of the Global Peace Index, that is an effort to look in a systemic way the cost of calculation of conflicts, and the costs are colossal,

I think it is about 14% of global gross domestic product. In general, we hope the governments will diminish their military spending and can spend more on peace infrastructures and especially good education and good social services for people, and build the conditions for human security, which we see as the most important of all. So of course, military expenditure is a hot potato, but this is a discussion in which we engage in talks with various governments.

There are many hot spots around the world, in Europe, say in Ukraine, in the Middle East, Africa, tensions in Asia.

It is unfortunate that there are risks and that's why we have a very active network membership in Ukraine and in Russia. We are working on something like the UB Process between Russia and Ukraine to develop a Track 2 dialogue between the two that will initially focus on the role of media. Because what we see both in Ukraine as well as in Russia is a lot of stigmatization, which we think is very unhelpful in creating conditions for peace. So we will start from media and hopefully move on to discussing other issues. We try to bring civil society, religious leaders together from both sides of the conflict, and hopefully, have a constructive and in-depth analysis and come with suggestions that can help deliver to the governments and hope we can make a meaningful contribution to peacebuilding.

Finally, isn't recent arms build-up and growing military spending jeopardize your effort for peacebuilding and security around the globe as well as in NEA?

Yes, they will jeopardize our efforts, but let's face it, people want peace, to put it in simple terms. Violence in any society is terrible and it's always ordinary people who pay the price, that is, women, children and older people. In that sense, it is never difficult to be motivated for our work. We try to prevent violence in the public domain. There is basically a lot of support for that and we try to build relationships between civil societies. What we are doing is creating a space for North and South Koreans to talk to each other, if you see that happening, you ask yourself why does this not happen more often, and so are we facing huge challenges, but we at the UB Process feel very much motivated to continue with this dialogue and to make our contribution to peace in NEA. ■