

18th Annual KNC Conference summary

March 17-19, 2006 – Gaithersburg (North Washington DC)

Kurdish Quest for Independence and Prospects for Statehood

The Kurdish National Congress of North America concluded its 18th annual conference on Sunday March 19th. The focus of this year's conference was to encourage in-depth discussions on all four parts of Kurdistan and to bring political leaders, intellectuals and independent activists from East, West, North and South together. As in the past 17 years, the 18th Annual Conference got under way with the raising of the Kurdish flag. Dr. Wafa Khorsheed welcomed the attendees on Friday by briefly mentioning the last year's achievements and encouraged everyone to fully participate in the three day events.

Mr. Shwan Karim, KNC board member and chair of the Youth Committee introduced the first panel by listing some of the activities of The Kurdish American Youth Organization (KAYO), a KNC affiliate, and pointed out the importance of youth in the future of our nation. Subjects ranged from runaway youth and honor killings to inter-racial and arranged marriages. Panel members included Ms. Aryan Akrayi, Ms. Sheinei Saleem, Mr. Nezar Ahmed Tovi, Mr. Ara Alan and Mr. Butan Amedi. Much emphasis was given to young Kurdish women's rights and the value of communication between parents and their children who have been raised outside Kurdistan. Goran Sadjadi, the president of KAYO also spoke of the organization's web site and the services they provide including a place for youth to publish their own articles and opinions.

Several guest speakers followed with a diverse set of topics. Dr. Jaques Wilson of Kurdish Human Rights Watch (KHRW) listed many projects in Southern Kurdistan that are in process and answered questions on status and focus of these projects. Dr. Kamal Artin highlighted the importance of unity to achieve independence, which has been described by some leaders as wishful thinking. He argued wishful thinking of other oppressed nations as well as noble ideas of anti slavery movement, woman's rights activists, and many others who have made an improvement in people's lives have come true. He differentiated between ideas and behaviors that serve humanity and those that are against it. He concluded that Kurdish dream of independence is just a matter of time and achievable with unity among Kurds and support from international community, since it is a noble and humanistic idea or "wishful thinking". Dr. Kirmanj Gundi focused his talk on Northern Kurdistan and mentioned the legacy and birth of the Turkish state that resulted in banning of Kurdish culture as well as denial of its existence and attempts to obliterate the Kurdish identity. He followed by saying that: "In the 1980s, our people saw another terminology added to describe their identity, the so-called Good Kurds, Bad Kurds". He followed by discussing the role of the United States' government, for coining the term "Good Kurds" for the Kurds in Iraq, who assisted the U.S. in its war to remove Saddam Hussein's regime. And that: "The term "Bad Kurds" the U.S. has graciously applied to describe our brethren in Turkey". Mr. Bakhtyar Zuhdi, stressed that Kurdish independence can only be secured by economic independency. He reminded us that, our rural areas should be revitalized and become more productive and that our light industries

need to grow to a level of providing sustainability in case economic blockade is imposed on an independent Kurdistan. He believes that we are a long time away from economic independency in Southern Kurdistan.

Chairman of the 18th Annual KNC Conference, Mr. Thomas Ver Ploeg opened the Saturday sessions by welcoming attendees and guests and touching on the current events of Northern, Southern, Eastern and Western Kurdistan. He stated that these are times of great change and that this has been said for the past 18 years which is testament to rapidly changing political climate in the Middle East. He also repeated the emphasis of this year's conference on different parts of Kurdistan and encouraged all attendees to engage in discussions that were planned specific to each occupied region as well as the free region in Southern Kurdistan.

Sherkoh Abbas of the Kurdish American Committee for Democracy in Syria chaired a panel on Western Kurdistan and gave a report on the formation of the Kurdish Front for Promoting Democracy & Freedom in Syria. He followed by reading the 13 points issued by the participating political parties of the Washington Conference held the previous week. The panel consisted of political party representatives and independent Kurdish leaders such as Mr. Mobarak Al-Khaznawi and Mr. Abdel Baqi Yousif from Yeketi. Panel members discussed their desire for regime change in Syria to a democratic one that would recognize a federal Kurdish state. Kurdish parties are taking a leadership role in creating a formidable opposition to the Baath Party instead of following behind their Arab counterparts. Also, the newly released report from Refugee International, "Buried Alive" about the stateless people of Western Kurdistan was mentioned several times and praised.

The panel on Eastern Kurdistan was diverse and included five representatives from Kurdish political parties. Ms. Soraya Serajeddini introduced the topic by recounting the victimization of Kurds in Iran and the need for Kurds to take a leadership role in the Middle East. She stressed that while we should not allow the world to forget the atrocities committed against Kurds, it is time now to act as leaders and not victims. Panelists discussed their desire and accomplishments towards forming a political front in Eastern Kurdistan. Mr. Hamid Bahrami of Komala Party stressed the need to stop the Iranian nuclear program and gave reasons why this move by the current regime in Iran is destabilizing the world and the Kurds' responsibility at this junction in time. Mr. Shamsi of Komala articulated the long history of Kurdish national struggle and its unique characteristics in relation to other ethnic groups in Iran. He recounted his party's role in promoting civil groups in Iran struggling to achieve a better life and tied it to the national struggle of Kurds and their resistance movement. During the question and answer session, Dr. Morteza Esfandiari of KDPI stressed that his party included many Shiaat Kurds such as himself. He also stressed the need for the Kurdish opposition to work closely with other ethnic groups in Iran. Aref Bawajani of the newly formed Party Serbasti pointed out the failed attempts at federalism and limited self determination for Kurdistan and presented his views of independence for Eastern Kurdistan from Iran as the only viable option. Zagros Yazdanpanah, North American representative of the Revolution Union of Kurdistan followed by mentioning that his party believes in an

independent Kurdistan but will work within the platform of a Federal Democratic Iran for the time being.

KNC paid a special tribute to Professor Dr. Ahmad Ali Uthman delivered by his long time friend, colleague, and KNC past-president Dr. Hikmat Fikrat. Professor Uthman passed away on December 14, 2005 leaving a great void in the heart of all his friends and associates who had the pleasure of knowing him. Dr. Uthman was a professor of Oral Surgery and Oral Medicine at New York State University in Buffalo and a past Dean of the Dental College of the University of Baghdad. He was a true Kurdish patriot. He had a real passion for the causes of his beloved people and that of the subjugated Kurdish nation at large. Ahmad Uthman was one of the founding members of KNC and a past executive vice president and general secretary of the organization as well as a founder and past president of the Kurdish-American Medical Association (KAMA). As KNC members said their final farewell to him, they vowed to keep his legacy alive and follow his footsteps in the service of their nation. (A full text of the memorial address in addition to photos of Dr. Uthman can be found on the KNC website). A letter from Dr. Uthman's family thanking KNC for the special tribute was read to the audience.

Dr. Saman Shali, KNC president, addressed the attendees describing the past year as one filled with optimism as well as frustrations. He noted that the call for independence has increased in the region and for the first time in our history, an opportunity has opened up to demand that our right to self-determination be respected. He added that Kurds have worked very hard to implement the process of democratization in Iraq and have participated actively in all the elections and have become the glue to hold Iraq together. In conclusion he called on the international community to recognize the rights of the Kurdish people equally in all parts of Kurdistan, and to stop labeling the Kurds as "Bad Kurds and Good Kurds". He also urged the international community and organizations to conduct a national referendum throughout Kurdistan, asking the Kurdish people for once what they want and to stop the policy of making decisions for them behind doors.

Dr. Asad Khailany opened the discussion on Northern Kurdistan by pointing out major changes in the U.S foreign policy. He continued that while in the past decades, the U.S was willing to work with dictatorships and sacrifice democracy for stability the current line of thinking is shifting towards achieving stability through the promotion of democratic governments. Mr. Christopher Hitchens, the renowned journalist and political analyst spoke of the U.S government's realization that Kurds are an ally once the Turks denied US forces of using their bases to launch an attack on Saddam's regime. Mr. Brusk Reshvan stressed the necessity of forming a unified front for representing all political parties and personalities in Northern Kurdistan and the creation of concrete solution proposals for the Kurdish question so that everyone would know what Kurds want. The panelists further expressed their skepticism about EU's role and motivation re-iterating that EU is mainly interested in keeping the Kurdish problem away from its borders. It has not announced any solution proposals to the Kurdish question so far and is unlikely to do so in the future. The Kurdish question for the EU is a sub-topic under the Copenhagen Criteria. On the solution to the Kurdish question in the North, the U.S can play a more effective role; the southern experiment is unfolding currently and it is highly expected

that both in West and East the U.S might be a great factor. They also mentioned the need for the Kurdish parties of the North to have a clear Kurdish message and not to continue their failed strategy of trying to be pluralistic democracy parties with diluted programs. Mr. Jeff Klein of KurdishMedia.com concluded the panel by recounting the positive effects of Turkey's bid to join the European Union and recounted his experiences before and after the reforms in Amed. He told the audience that the towns and villages and the people are expressing their identity more freely and while Turkey's EU membership is not the whole answer, it has helped the struggle in Northern Kurdistan.

Dr. Najmaldin Karim introduced the panel on Southern Kurdistan, mentioning the achievements as well as disappointments of the last few years. He mentioned the lost opportunity of adding Kirkuk to the Kurdish controlled region and declaration of independence in 2003. Dr. Liam Anderson, an expert on constitution documents opened his talk by listing some of the shortfalls of the draft Iraqi constitution. He expressed reservations that the process for a democratic constitution would succeed in Iraq and even if it did, whether the spirit to implement a democratic constitution exists in Iraq. Christopher Hitchens participated in this panel as well and re-iterated that the relationship between Kurds and the United States and the West in general has changed forever because of the war in Iraq. Qubad Talabani, PUK representative in Washington DC, mentioned accomplishments and much work ahead for the KRG. He explained that while independence is ideal, we need to build our infrastructure such as a bank. During the question and answer session, Mr. Talabani appealed to the Kurdish American community to become more active and to lobby their government on behalf of Kurdistan. He also denounced the burning of the Halabja monument which was the overwhelming opinion of the conference attendees.

Later on Saturday evening, KNC honored Dr. Najmaldin Karim, co-founder and past president of KNC and current president of the Washington Kurdish Institute with its annual "Lifetime Achievement Award". Dr. Karim's contributions to the Kurdish struggle were chronicled in a slide show prior to the banquet and included his tremendous effect in promoting the Kurdish plight both in the United States and in Kurdistan. The award ceremony continued with presenting the first KNC "Kurdish Artist Appreciation" award to Zuhdi Sardar, a longtime KNC member and supporter. Mr. Sardar has promoted the Kurdish cause through his art for decades and is a well-known painter and sculpture in the United States and the world.

Mr. Nijyar Shemdin, the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) representative in North America and the UN, addressed the conference on Sunday with a message of support from Nechirvan Barzani, Prime Minister of Kurdistan. Mr. Shemdin stated that the Prime Minister wishes success for the conference and appreciates what KNC is doing for Kurds and Kurdistan. He also relayed to the members the great efforts of the Kurdistan Regional Government in trying to keep Kurdistan safe and prosperous by way of fighting the spirits of evil who do not want a secure and safe Kurdistan. He followed by saying that the Prime Minister asks all international organizations including KNC to support the KRG in this effort.

The KNC 18th annual conference concluded with the election of the Board of Directors and a committee to review the organization's bylaw. The newly elected KNC Board then met and selected the KNC Executive Committee. Results from the elections are as follows:

Dr. Saman Shali President

Ms. Soraya Serajeddini Vice President

Mr. Buland Baban Treasurer

Mr. Tom Ver Ploeg Secretary

Dr. Wafa Korsheed Board Member

Dr. Kamal Artin Board Member

Mr. Shwan Karim Board Member

Miss Lana Salih Board Member

Mr. Brusk Reshvan Board Member

The conference ended with calls and recommendations to the International community and the Kurdish leaderships:

1. Call for Unity among Kurdish organizations and parties for the creation of a common strategy and National Agenda.
2. The conference attendees emphasized the new realities and opportunities in Western and Eastern Kurdistan for gaining Kurdish right to self-determinations
3. The importance of Turkey to be a part of the European Union while recognizing the cosmetic nature of many of the reforms implemented up to this point. Conference attendees call on the European Union to accept Turkey to the union only when real democratization takes place in Turkey.
4. The Kurd in Southern Kurdistan facing challenges starting with the new constitution to the possibility of the civil war. The conference called on the Kurdish parliament to be prepared for establishing a Kurdish state and to lobby for support of the US, UN and other allies especially if civil war breaks out. No one can blame the Kurds of breaking away from Iraq because the Kurds did everything in their power to keep Iraq together.
5. Speed up the re-unification of the two Kurdish Regional Governments in Southern Kurdistan.
6. Call on UN to conduct a national referendum in Southern Kurdistan.
7. KNC must aggressively lobby the U.S State Department, the Senate, and the Congress to change its policy with regards to the Kurdish issue and equally

promote democracy and Kurdish rights in all parts of the Middle and Near East including the occupying governments of Iran, Syria and Turkey.

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