Columbia Center Tries to Give Peace a Chance in War-Torn Nations

BY KATHERINE MOORE

The work of peace-building can be arduous and discouraging, even heartbreaking. That hit home for some Colombians in early February, when a terrorist bomb struck the offices of two major Kurdish political parties in the city of Erbil, northern Iraq, killing more than a hundred Iraqis and injuring scores of others.

“We knew that most likely people we had worked with for years were in those buildings,” said Thomas Hill, program coordinator for Columbia’s Center for International Conflict Resolution (CICR). “All we could do from New York was send emails.”

Bringing peace to war-torn areas like Iraq requires not just an emotionally thick skin, but a huge investment of time as well. Since 1998, CICR has been helping rival northern Iraqi groups address their disputes through peace-making tactics such as dialogue, mediation and negotiation.

What began as work to consolidate a tenuous accord between the two main Kurdish parties, the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), is now the basis for Columbia’s programs in politically complex northern Iraq today. With a June 30 deadline looming for U.S. authorities to hand sovereignty back to the Iraqis, a myriad of religious and ethnic groups are vying for recognition.

Center director Andrea Bartoli, director of education and training Zachary Metz have logged more than 60,000 miles from JFK to Sulaimani, Dohuk, Mosul and Kirkuk.

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“Conflict is a powerful force much like nuclear energy. It can be used for tremendous good or tremendous evil. It all depends on how it is harnessed.”

In Kirkuk, Iraq, concerns about U.S. intelligence gaffes and Iraq’s pre-war weapons capabilities have reached deaf ears. Whether stockpiles of illicit weapons exist or not—northern citizens, many of them Kurds who were driven from their homes and villages by Saddam Hussein during the 1990s, are ready to rebuild.

Yet, in this oil-rich city along the Hasa River, boasting archaeological remains more than five thousand years old, ethnic discord between the Kurdish, Turkmen and Arab communities continues. Sparked anew with the capture of Saddam, a power struggle in the disputed territory 250 kilometers from Baghdad threatens to fracture the country further and jeopardize long-term stability.

To address centuries-old grievances, CICR directs much of its attention toward middle-level members of society who can bridge the divide between top leadership and the often-disenfranchised populace. “It is this group that can most effect change,” explained Bartoli. “They have the ability to reach both senior leaders and ordinary citizens, to press governments to solve problems by taking action early and to encourage ongoing discussions.”

The center, housed at SIPA, has conducted three conflict resolution workshops for about 40 Kurds from both parties, in New York, Beirut and Dohuk, Iraq, since September 2000. CICR experts recently trained Arab, Kurdish and Turkmen representatives of the new Civil Society Organization of Iraq (CSOI) from Kirkuk.

Columbia has developed strong relationships with the three universities in Iraqi Kurdistan—Sulaimani, the University of Sulaimani and the University of Dohuk. This led to formation in 2001 of the Academic Consortium for Cooperation and Conflict Resolution, which also includes the University of Dohuk, Islam University and the Harvard-affiliated Conflict Management Group. The center has supported professors in designing interdisciplinary conflict resolution seminars that will be offered to students at all three universities in Iraqi Kurdistan in July or August 2004.

In partnership with two American non-governmental organizations, the North Carolina-based Research Triangle Institute and Washington, D.C.’s ACLEDO/AC (Agricultural Cooperative Development International and Volunteers in Overseas Cooperative Assistance), CICR provides counsel to community-based organizations as well.

“Through capacity-building techniques—everything from teaching NGOs how to manage staff and money, fundraising and accounting principles, we help nonprofits expand nationally,” explained Hill. “The establishment of strong indigenous organizations is the next step in ensuring continued widespread security throughout the country.”

The center has powerful credentials and an impressive voice: former Sen. George Mitchell (D-Maine), who was a peace-broker in Northern Ireland, is a senior fellow. Staff members have played a key role in other volatile areas of the world, including East Timor during the transition to independence. In Burma (or Myanmar as it is called by its military junta), center staff have been working with ethnic nationality groups who hope to gain a voice in future tripartite negotiations with the pro-democracy movement and the current military regime.

“We live in a world that requires more and more sophistication, dedication and understanding of the broads causes of conflict, as well as constructive responses,” said Bartoli, who was trained as an anthropologist. CICR’s director has been involved in conflict resolution since the 1980s, focused particularly in such African countries as Sudan, Burundi, Mozambique and Angola. “No matter what, and no matter where, peace is always an option. It is a choice that must be birthed and nurtured through individual and collective action.”

Columbia University Announces Advisory Committee for New Athletic Director Search

Columbia University President Lee C. Bollinger has appointed a committee to advise him in the search for a successor to John A. Reeves, Columbia’s athletic director. In December 2003, President Bollinger announced that Reeves will retire on June 30.

The committee, which is chaired by President Bollinger, comprises: Thomas Brasberger, senior associate athletic director and member of the Columbia crew team; Jennifer Fondiller, dean of Admissions, Barnard College; Theodore Gregory, principlal, Heidrick and Struggles, CC ‘74; Eileen Byrn, senior associate, Sylvia Chan, Boston University, and professor of English and comparative literature; Christina Kubacki, senior at Columbia College and member of the Columbia swim team; Devon Kaelin, Cravath, Swaine & Moore, CC ’96; and Richard Ruzika, managing director of Goldman Sachs, CC ’81.

The committee’s and its advisors’ meetings will be held beginning on June 18 and will meet over the coming summer months to discuss possible candidates and make their recommendations to the president for Reeves’ replacement. President Bollinger expects to name a new athletic director by late spring or early summer.