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## United Nations Holds 54th Annual NGO/DPI Conference - Armenian Presence Significant This Year

By Talia Jebajian

NEW YORK, NY - The United Nations began its 54th Annual Conference of Non-Governmental Organizations associated with the Department of Public Information here on Monday, September 10, 2001. Over two thousand international participants gathered in the formidable General Assembly Hall to focus on this year's theme: NGOs Today: Diversity of the Volunteer Experience. The conference was especially meaningful this year since the UN proclaimed 2001 as the International Year of Volunteers. Several UN dignitaries were present for the Opening Session, including the Secretary-General of the United Nations, Kofi Annan, and President of the 55th Session of the UN General Assembly, Harri Holkeri. In addition, a special live videoconference took place with the President of Mexico, Vicente Fox. Later in the afternoon, several NGO Workshops were held in various conference rooms of the UN, one of which housed a solid Armenian presence. The status of volunteerism in Armenia by its local citizens was discussed.

What made this year's confer



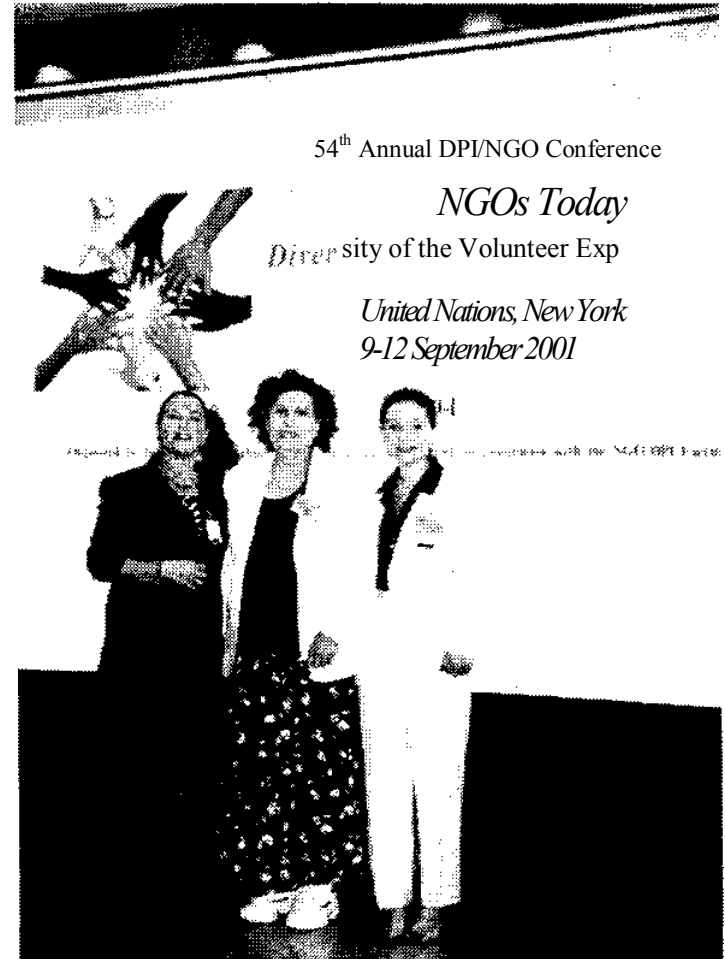
**Anie Kalayjian in General Assembly Hall of United Nations during 54<sup>th</sup> annual NGO/DPI Conference**

that over 600 organizations from over 90 countries were represented at the Conference.

After Tharoor passed the floor onto Harri Holkeri, Holkeri offered attendees new ways to approach global volunteerism. "When several people take action to the same direction, such as within the global volunteer movement, diverse backgrounds and experiences are combined making it possible to step out

"and even your enemies, referring to the Ottoman Turks, who slaughtered over one and a half million innocent Armenians in Asia Minor in their centuries old homeland."

The afternoon session of the conference contained a number of workshops focused on various goals in volunteerism. One of the first scheduled workshops was sponsored by the Armenian International Women's Association (AIWA), the International Society for Traumatic Stress Studies (New York Chapter) and the Armenian General Benevolent Union (New York Chapter). The title was NGOs Working Together: Gender Perspectives in Development, with Mary Toumayan from AIWA and Haigoush Kalinian, from Pacific Graduate School of Psychology, acting as Co-Moderators of the panel. The two speakers were Svetlana Aslanyan, President of the Center for Development of Civil Society (CDCS), which is based in Armenia, and Steven C. Rosenthal, Founder and Executive Director of Cross-Cultural Solutions, based in New Rochelle, NY. The program focused on the panelists sharing their experiences and recommendations regarding gender perspectives



(L to R) Dr. Anie Kalayjian,

ence significant for Armenians was the large number of Armenian participants and sponsorships (by organizations), reflecting their great contributions to the work of the UN. Involvement went as high as members of the NGO/DPI Executive Committee. Representing the NGO of World Federation for Mental Health, Dr. Anie Kalayjian was this year's Conference Chair and is also the NGO/DPI Executive Committee's Vice Chair for the 2000-2002 term.

This was the first time in UN history that an Armenian was named as Chair of this Conference. Valentine Berberian, an Executive Committee Member from the Armenian Relief Society, was the Conference Midday Workshops Chair, and Margaret Melkonian from Hague Appeal for Peace will also serve as an Executive Committee Member. M. Lena Takvorian was invited on behalf of Dr. Kalayjian to serve as an Intern on the Conference Planning Committee. Benon Sevan, UN Security Coordinator and Executive Director of the Office of the Iraq Programme, was due to be a Moderator at one of the Tuesday panels.

The Conference opened with a welcome by Shashi Tharoor, Interim Head of the DPI, who presided over the morning session. He indicated that the participants of the Conference "will explore the theme of volunteerism and how it affects the work of the NGO community, especially those working with us in the United Nations." Tharoor was also pleased to note

answers, to make a difference." The Secretary-General discussed three areas that he felt volunteers and NGOs should focus on: "the AIDS epidemic, the fight against poverty and the quest to protect the global environment." In addition, he encouraged NGOs "to reach out, and to replenish [their] ranks with the new ideas and energies that young people have in such abundance - not least because people who volunteer in their youth are far more likely to volunteer later in life." In his videoconference with the attendees of the Opening Session, Mexico's President, Vicente Fox, praised the work of NGOs and volunteers by saying that their daily, arduous work is reflected in international daily affairs.

In the final welcoming remark of the morning, Conference Chair, Anie Kalayjian, mentioned that while "conducting voluntary psychosocial and spiritual outreach programs in disaster-ridden areas around the world, I have witnessed an inherent goodness in people, and a deep-rooted desire to help one another." She urged everyone to become involved in volunteerism as a way of finding fulfillment, not just by doing a single good act, but to be continuously involved in the betterment of humanity. "I am interested in what you do after the conference.. .Let's keep in mind that the hard part of doing good work is that we have to do them [sic] every day." Kalayjian also said that, as a young girl, her grandparents and parents always taught her to love her friends,

and volunteerism in promoting development.

Rosenthal, whose organization has been featured on CNN and in over 300 publications such as The New York Times, gave a presentation on Gender & Volunteering. His findings showed that women volunteers (78%) outnumber men

volunteers (22%) significantly and that women were more likely to be labeled as "volunteers," while men were named as "trustees," giving the masculine title more prestige. Comments were raised afterward, examining how the title or word "volunteer" may carry a connotation that is no longer positive in today's society and that perhaps different approaches must be used in promoting "volunteerism."

Cross-Cultural Solutions is one of the leading international volunteer organizations in the United States and sends over 1,000 volunteers abroad each

year. The goal of the organization is employing volunteer humanitarian action to empower local communities, foster cultural sensitivity, while understanding and contributing grassroots solutions to the global challenges of providing health care, education and social development.

Aslanyan discussed the bleak outlook on volunteerism in Armenia by its citizens.

The underlying cause is only partially because of the country's current weak economy, where the destitute far outnumber those who can help without monetary compensation. Further, an Armenian citizen does not benefit

(i.e. tax relief) from making a monetary donation in Armenia. Although for the few who wish to give of their time, the majority (mostly women) desire to help children.

Another cause goes back to Soviet times when Saturdays were set aside for women as a mandatory day for "volunteering," thus killing the true notion of volunteering. It was only after perestroika, Aslanyan said, that women in Armenia discovered the real meaning of volunteering.

NGOs were formed in Armenia only after its independence in 1991, but even after ten years, NGOs still face many problems for survival in Armenia. According to Aslanyan, two significant problems are the lack of government policy on them and a major lack of funds. Those organizations having the funds to open often close after the initial supplies, financial or otherwise, are depleted.

The history of Armenia, however, paints a different picture on volunteerism, Aslanyan added. Volunteerism has always played

an important role in the lives of Armenians. In fact, historical experts have maintained that Armenia and Armenians have survived because of women volunteering, either in the church or in other social/cultural venues.

Dr. Svetlana Aslanyan is the founding president of CDCS, which conducts a number of programs to improve the condition of women and children in Armenia. Since 1996, she has devoted herself to researching the role of women and the problems associated with the Women's Movement in Armenia. She received her Ph.D. in Linguistics from the Institute of Linguistics of the National Academy of Sciences of Armenia. Currently she is working in the United States as a Fulbright Scholar at Rutgers University.

Following the presentations by the two panelists, a lively discussion period followed, in which two key issues were raised regarding women and volunteerism.

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James Sahagian  
Financial Consultant

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