

## **International Conference on Language, Literature and Culture of the Kurdish People**

Dec 9 – 10, 1999

Dear President,  
Dear Friends,

It is with great pleasure that I accepted the invitation to attend this important International Conference on Language, Literature and Culture of the Kurdish People, organised by The Kurdish Institute of Brussels and the Kurdish PEN Centre.

We all know the troubled background to this conference – and I believe we all acknowledge the necessity of this conference. It comes at an important time. Every sign of a retreat from the blind alley policies of today, that are so desperately affecting the Kurdish people, would be a welcome signal to the world that there is yet hope for peaceful developments in these geographical areas of the world.

If democratic peace is not achieved, the effects will be continued non-development, poverty, desperation, and, inevitably, crime across all society.

In our world of conflicts of today, there are too many nationalistic politicians, too much tribalism, too much outdated military ideology and all too few statesmen. It is true that all of us need and seek identity. The acceptable face of ‘nationalism’ today is the one of cultural pride, pride in one’s own identity. The vitally important thing is that this identity is peaceful – and not at the expense of others, and the right of others to their different identity. To be internationally acceptable today, the essence of any national sentiment must be generous and tolerant – in fact, multi-ethnic! The reason for this is quite simple. The concept of nation – which concerns ethnicity -, and state, – which concerns territory – very seldom overlap.

Under these circumstances, the prime task of International PEN is to promote literature and freedom to write. Where conflicts loom, International PEN has taken as its position to support the free word and yet, as a self-imposed ethical element, never to stoop to the demon of hate-speech nor accept violence as a means of solving conflicts.

Our members are free to analyse, but never, as members of PEN, to advocate solutions not founded on a democratic Rule of Law. And if laws are unjust, then the free word should help induce change in those laws – through the weight of the arguments on the world scene of democratic society. We are believers in the ideas from what is called the period of Enlightenment in Western philosophy – but maybe really a time in human history that most of us believe yet has to be achieved.

As a positive fact, International PEN has for many years now been involved with the rights of languages, and our Catalan Centre has been motor in an international movement of promoting with UNESCO what is hoped to become a United Nations Universal Declaration of Linguistic Rights. I know we regret that Mr. Carles Torner of Catalan PEN cannot be with us today, so let me just mention what this UDLR is about.

This Declaration is aimed at providing a Charter for the Right of all languages to exist and for each and every individual person the right to hold and speak the language he or she chooses. It has met enthusiasm from many governments of UNESCO – and with sullen opposition from a few. The Declaration can itself be downloaded from the Internet, and is under continuous support from International PEN. It is on the foundation of both our Charter of International PEN and this proposed UDLR we stand when we uphold the values of the Kurdish language.

International PEN gathers its strength also in being a circle of writers who are also committed to working for fellow writers in prison. Too many colleagues are in prison because of repressive politics proclaiming perverted ideals of state nationalism. We will continue to react against these politics. Let me give you just one example – just one - as provocative as ridiculous. Edip Polat, a writer and scientist from Diyarbakir published a manuscript examining the fate of botanical names

of flowers and plants in Turkish universities – and found that many Kurdish plants, given Latin names by classical botanists through the ages associating to the geographical origins of the plants, had had these names changed by Turkish authorities in all books in use in Turkish universities. On publishing these comments he was sentenced, yet again, to prison for causing affront to the Turkish nation. These are the politics of a sick nationalism indeed.

Let me tell you that International PEN will continue to support those who wish to call flowers by their classical Latin names, as it will continue to claim as the birthright of all writers to paint skies and clouds in words of their own choice, tell us about the colours of the setting sun in whatever language they wish – and describe the tales and traditions of their homeland earth to their children in ways which only their proper language can truly acknowledge.

Yes, - International PEN believes that each and every human being has the intrinsic right to speak the language which best mirrors their desire to reflect the culture of which they feel part, their historic experiences, their quest for identity, their desire for social and gender justice, and that all this should be reflected in their literary ambitions in writing and in poetry. Let no other person or any political system define you! - International PEN believes in the right for everyone to define himself or herself on their own. This is the heart of literature and poetry.

These are the values we stand by and uphold: the quest for human dignity through language, literature and poetry; and the quest for civic dignity through freedom to write.

Mr. Chairman, I wish this important Conference all success.  
Terry Carlbom  
International Secretary  
International PEN