

GROUP OF 78: REPORT TO MEMBERS, 2008-09
Ottawa, September 2009

Over the past two years, the Group of 78 has updated its mandate and opened the door for some new types of programming and operating, building on its solid and proven base of its annual policy conference and luncheon presentations. During an active 2008-09 year, we have initiated and explored some areas of longer term planning, including two ongoing working groups on Afghanistan and the Middle East. Our activities have included the following:

Afghanistan

A major component of the Group's activities continued to focus on Afghanistan, on which there were two longer-term initiatives, both ongoing from the previous year.

The Pathways to Peace initiative undertaken by Peacebuild and supported by Kabul University, the Afghan Civil Society Forum, Global Partnership for the Prevention of Armed Conflict partners Concordis International of the UK and The 3D Security Initiative at Eastern Mennonite University of the USA, together with Canadian civil society organizations (The Group of 78, Project Ploughshares and MATCH International) has been extensively refined. The purpose of the project is to develop a national and international institutional platform for the support of local peace initiatives and research, through the exploration of the concerns, fears and aspirations of Afghans and representatives from the region. A series of conferences in Kabul, Dubai, Ottawa, Washington and Brussels are envisaged. An NGO workshop is planned for Kabul in late November to further refine the project and ensure that it responds to the needs of Afghan civil society. Peacebuild is currently in detailed discussions with the Canadian Department of Foreign Affairs with respect to initial funding for the project; other sources of funding are being actively pursued.

The Group of 78 had agreed to support Amnesty International's action on the question of Afghan detainees – whether Canadian personnel were subject to the Charter of Rights and Freedoms in their actions of turning over Afghan prisoners to local authorities, where they were tortured or mistreated. The phase this year was to prepare for an appeal to the Federal Court on this issue. The Group found legal assistance on a pro bono basis and we preparing to be a supplementary supporter to Amnesty's appeal when the Federal Court decided not to hear the appeal, a surprising decision. Amnesty is now weighing the basis for a further appeal to the Supreme Court.

Middle East

Arising out of discussions at 2008 policy conference we formed a Middle East working group to track the long standing set of issues of Israel-Palestine, to monitor Canadian government positions and actions, and to propose matters, including program activities, to the Board. This initiative in turn led the Board to focus the 2009 policy conference on this theme. The working group has been most active in helping to design and mount the conference under the title *Peace, Human Rights and the Rule of Law: Canada's Role in the Middle East*.

Luncheons

The mainstay of the Group's programs throughout the year continues to be the monthly luncheons held in Ottawa. The subject matter for this year's line-up ranged over issues of immediate concern and broader ongoing policy challenges. The specific sessions included:

- October 2008 Steven Staples: Canada after Bush
- November 2008 Alex Neve: Afghan Prisoner Challenge: What is at stake?
- January 2009 Gerry Barr: What's Wrong with Canadian Aid and how to Fix It.
- February 2009 Gerry Ohlsen & Ruth Anne Mitchell: Afghanistan: Pathways to Peace – A Report
- March 2009 Newton Bowles: The UN Convention for Women: Is it Working?
- April 2009 Paul Heinbecker: A Security Council Seat: Ours to lose
- May 2009 Diane Ralph: The Canadian Jewish Pro-Palestinian Movement
- June 2009 Stephen Brown: CIDA under Assault: What next for Canada's aid program?

Common Actions

The Group joined with Peacebuild and other organizations to urge the Canadian Government to follow up on the UN's *Geneva Declaration on Armed Violence and Development* and engage fully with the United Nations to implement measures to prevent armed conflict.

Membership

Although we opened up our membership application process, the number of members did not grow during the year. Our members are the vital base for the organization; they ARE the organization, and the Board will need to address the issue of numbers and the different sectors in the broader community that they represent.

Financial Status

The lack of growth in membership combined with the decreasing access to the types of funding the Group enjoyed for many years has produced a serious situation in our finances. The Treasurer's report provides more specifics and the Treasurer has spoken about this challenge previously. The incoming Board, with the help of the membership, will need to address this an urgent item in terms of increasing the membership significantly in a short period of time and finding other, even small, sources of support.

Board & Executive Committee

The Board has met four times during the year, including meetings after and before our conference and annual meetings. The Executive Committee has met more frequently, sometimes monthly, to address the immediate business of the Group. We did not set up committees on organizational matters during the year, something the new Board may wish to address.

While facing challenges on our organizational side, the Group also recognizes the opportunity – even the requirement – of expanded activity to promote a more energetic and effective role for Canada on the world's stage. The needs demand our full attention and resolve.