

Nobel Peace Prize winner 2003, Ms Shirin Ebadi, speaks at meeting in Brussels

No, to military interventions and economic sanctions in Iran. Help the people decide their future!

At a meeting organised by Security and Defence Agenda (SDA) and the Friends of Europe in Brussels on the 4th of March Ms Shirin Ebadi, the Iranian 2003 Nobel Peace Prize winner, clearly spoke out against sending military troupes to Iran or enforcing economic sanctions to force the government to improve the country's situation on human rights.

Although Iran has signed many of the UN agreements on human rights and tries to convince the international community that it abides by them, even putting up its candidacy for the Human Rights Council, the situation on human rights is very bad in Iran. A woman's life is worth half a man's life, men can have four wives, and testimonies of two women are needed against the testimony of one man. If one then considers that 60% of university students are female and that many of the university professors are women, one wonders about this inconsistency.

Ms Ebadi proclaimed herself not to be a politician, but just a lawyer. She therefore concerned herself with the situation of human rights within the legal system. Laws form the clearest statement of a government's vision on human rights. Discrimination is the essence of a lack of human rights and Iranian law is very discriminatory not only in relation to women's human rights, but also in terms of religious discrimination and freedom of expression. The Shia sect of Islam is the predominant religion in Iran and although other religions are recognised, they are subservient to the Shia sect. This is shown by the fact that for instance in Tehran, a city with 2 million people there are no mosques for the Sunnits, while punishments for people from other religions are more severe than for those following the state religion. Freedom of speech is allowed for those that praise the government. Those that criticise the government or the dominant religion are punished. At present a new law is being discussed in parliament that will allow capital punishment for criticism against the Constitution, including on weblogs etc. Even though the slogan for the Revolution was 'Independence and Freedom', there are no free elections. Candidates have to be approved by the Guardian Council, who will allow no deviating opinions. These are very clear examples of the lack of human rights.

The Iranian people are critical of the government, but they will have to make the changes themselves. It cannot be done through foreign military interventions or economic sanctions as this only worsens the situation for the Iranian people and offer the Iranian government a pretext for even more restrictive measures. The situation in Iraq proves this. Western governments need to stay in dialogue with the government not focusing only on nuclear energy, but include human rights issues. Recently the EU discussed human rights issues with the Iranian government, focusing on children's rights. Although they brought experts to take part in the discussions and Ms Ebadi, as an expert on human rights and children's rights, proposed to take part as well, she was completely ignored. This is not the way to achieve results as the outcome of the discussions proved. It is clear that in such discussions civil society needs to be included. If the situation in Iran is to be changed it will not only need presidents to talk to presidents and governments to governments, civil society needs to talk to civil society. It is the people that make the changes. This is a long process, but they will ultimately achieve results. In Iran the young people (70% of the population) are dissatisfied, but

Iran has a very dynamic civil society that aims to bring about changes, acting peacefully. They need support and the backing of the people. Once that is achieved changes will take place and the human rights situation will improve dramatically. Finishing her presentation Ms Ebani said that this is what she has been, is and will be supporting through her work.

Reported by: JH