

WFP Birmingham, UK's Visit of Sun Hak Peace Prize Winner Sakena Yacoobi

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On the 15 April 2018, we had the rare privilege of a visit from Dr Sakena Yacoobi, the co-recipient of UPF's Sun Hak Peace Prize in 2017. The visit to Birmingham originated in Dakar, Senegal, where my husband David attended an Africa Summit jointly hosted by UPF and President Macky Sall's government. During a breakfast conversation with her, David discovered that Dr Yacoobi was to take part in a conference in Oxford, in April, and asked her if she would consider coming up to Birmingham to share her story and life experience. Things worked out nicely, and she arrived in Birmingham on Saturday 14 April, sharing informally with a small number of local Peace Federation members in the evening, followed by an interview with Unity FM radio station on Sunday morning, and then two public talks on Sunday afternoon and evening in our home.



Approximately 100 people attended each of the public talks, representing a very broad spectrum of the West Midlands interreligious and multicultural society. There were representatives from Birmingham City Council; Birmingham Council of Faiths; Amnesty International; Clifton Road mosque community; Guru Nanak Nishkam community; Arya Samaj; the Indian Ladies Club; Somali, Iranian, Gambian, and Pakistani organisations; Unity FM radio; the Federation of Indian Muslim Organisations, and several other NGO's. And of course a number of Afghans living in Birmingham attended, having come to our city as refugees, one of whom, Mariam, worked as a secretary to Dr Yacoobi in Pakistan about 20 years ago!

We also had the pleasure of Elisabeth Appleyard and her husband's company, with them having driven all the way down from Lancaster for the occasion. Elisabeth works for Creating Hope International, of which

Dr Yacoobi's 'Afghan Institute of Learning' is an integral part, and it was wonderful that they could meet up and have a chance to share together.

During her time of public and personal sharing, we learned from Dr Yacoobi about her time as a child, growing up in an Afghanistan which was relatively peaceful, and with a father who always stressed to her the importance of education. As political tensions during the 1970's, and then Soviet occupation, plunged the country into conflict and bloodshed, her parents sent her to America. There she continued her education, gained important academic qualifications, and then worked incredibly hard to be able to bring all of her family to safety. Having achieved this, a compelling inner calling then motivated her to place her life entirely in God's hands, returning to her native country, via Pakistan, in order to help particularly women and children in a fragile, dangerous, life-and-death day-to-day reality. By this time, Russian forces had left Afghanistan, and there was an increasing presence of Islamic fundamentalism.



Against this backdrop, Dr Yacoobi worked quietly, step by step, going into communities to begin establishing small centres for education and, crucially, training people she felt she could trust to become teachers. Not necessarily people just with an aptitude for teaching, but more than that people with a parental heart of caring for the education and entire well-being of children. Such a noble concept, and a key ingredient for success.

Starting with one person, a Mullah, she has expanded to around 1,000 staff, in the process establishing schools, orphanages, and even a hospital!! So many untold stories, touching and improving the lives of more than 14 million people, mainly children. A modern-day 'Mother Teresa'.

During the time for question and answer, Dr Yacoobi was asked the inevitable. "What about security?" "How could you do this under the nose of the Taliban?" "What are your views on the political situation?" "How do you fund your endeavours?" and, of course, "What motivated you, and still motivates you to keep going?" Politics apart, the central theme to all the answers she gave is her love for God, and her love of people, most of all children.

During the public part of the programme, we passed around our donation boxes, and through everyone's generosity could offer around £600 to her worthy cause. Holy money, from all our different faith and cultural traditions! Normally receiving honorariums for her talks, and online donations, she had never seen money raised in such a way, and was excitedly fascinated by our method of fundraising.

Informal conversations then continued on into the evening, until Dr Yacoobi finally 'collapsed', happily, having given her all, reflecting the way she lives her life. We are sure she will return one day, the one who has touched so many lives herself having been touched by our collective heart and spirit. We look forward to that, and everyone promised to keep her in their prayers until such time as we meet again.

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