JERUSALEM POST

Winnipeg university head fights Israel Apartheid Week

By RHONDA SPIVAK, SPECIAL TO THE JERUSALEM POST
03/14/2011 02:33

"The most effective response was a series of opportunities for Arab-Jewish dialogue," UW president Lloyd Axworthy says.

WINNIPEG, Manitoba – University of Winnipeg President Lloyd Axworthy, a former Canadian foreign minister, has taken an activist approach in dealing with the presence of Israel Apartheid Week for the first time on his campus this year, by having the university put on a series of programs that counter the delegitimization of the Jewish state.

"It is the responsibility of a university to ensure that an issue [the Israeli-Palestinian conflict] that's as important as this be given a full and fair hearing as opposed to a one-sided hearing," Axworthy told *The Jerusalem Post*.

"We felt the most effective way to respond to Israel Apartheid Week was to organize a series of opportunities in March for Arab-Jewish dialogue" that is "respectful, more open and fair" and promotes a greater understanding of the issues involved, he said.

The university administration sponsored a panel discussion last Tuesday by two Jewish members and two Arab members of a local Arab-Jewish Dialogue group.

The group, according to its statement of principles, believes that "the ultimate solution to the Arab-Israeli conflict is a sovereign, contiguous, democratic Palestinian state living side by side with a sovereign, secure, democratic Jewish state."

Axworthy said, "I had attended a meeting of the Arab-Jewish Dialogue and was impressed with the serious level of dialogue" in which they were engaged, such that he took the initiative to bring them onto his campus. The group has a number of Arab participants, especially from Egypt and Lebanon, albeit only one Palestinian.

Jim Carr, a Jewish member of the group and former deputy leader of the Manitoba Liberal Party, who spoke at the event said that the group had been meeting regularly for about three years and had "reached an agreement."

They propose a two-state solution "roughly along the 1967 borders" with "land swaps," with east Jerusalem as the Palestinian capital, "if they so decide."

The group agreed, however, that there would be "no right of return" for Palestinian refugees or their descendents to their 1948 villages, in order that "Israel could remain a Jewish state."

Ab Freig, a local business consultant who is Egyptian and a co-founder of the dialogue group, spoke of how "conflict resolution is dear to my heart," while another businessman, Osama Abu Zeid, who fought in the Egyptian army in the 1973 Yom Kippur war, spoke of how he was taught as a child that "Jews deserved to be buried in the sea."

Howard Morry, a lawyer and a Jewish co-founder of the group, spoke of how the dialogue advanced when he told Abu Zeid that he was "sorry for the loss of life" on the other side.

In the question period, Morry addressed a supporter of Israel Apartheid Week and said

that in the Arab-Jewish Dialogue, "we begin by not using words such as apartheid," because "when you take positions that delegitimize one side" the dialogue isn't productive. He also said that his group did not work on the basis "that Israel is an illegitimate state" and did not support a one-state solution, which was not something Israel would ever agree to or negotiate.

Jeremy Read, adviser to Axworthy's office, told the Post that the university "wanted to be proactive," to "set the tone" and provide a "a model that looks to find common ground" and shows how various opinions can be exchanged on campus in a way that is "intelligent, passionate and respectful."

Last Wednesday, the University of Winnipeg sponsored a talk on "Iran: Domestic Ramifications and Regional Ramifications" by Dr. David Menashri of Tel Aviv University, whom Axworthy himself introduced.

In addition to bringing the issue of Iran's quest to produce nuclear weapons to the forefront, the talk also served to underscore that the administration does not accept the notion of boycotting Israeli academics.

Axworthy, who in February 1999 and April 2000, was president of the UN Security Council with then-Canadian ambassador to the UN Robert Fowler, said he wanted a speaker "to bring to bear the role of Iran" in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, as it is an "important factor" in understanding the complexities of the Middle East.

In addition, on Thursday, the Department of Theology held a Jewish-Muslim dialogue, focusing on fostering greater understanding.

Axworthy told the Post that the university soon would be sponsoring a talk by Michael Dougall Bell to round out its series of programming to counter Israel Apartheid Week. Bell, a supporter of a two-state solution, is a former Canadian ambassador to Jordan (1987-90), Egypt (1994-98) and Israel (1990-92 and 1999-2003).

"Dr. Axworthy has demonstrated real leadership... by ensuring that students at his university are exposed to the religious and political complexities of the Middle East... One hopes that this intelligent and responsible scholarly approach will be a model for other university administrations in Canada and worldwide," said Catherine Chatterley, director of the Canadian Institute for the Study of Anti-Semitism, based in Winnipeg.

Shelley Faintuch, director of community relations for the Jewish Federation of Winnipeg, said, "Bravo!...Dr. Axworthy's courage serves as a role model for university presidents and administrators throughout North America."

Rhonda Spivak is editor of the Winnipeg Jewish Review e-paper (www.winnipegjewishreview.com).