

## Dubai students urged to promote inter-faith dialogue

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DUBAI // A prominent peace activist has urged students at the University of Wollongong in Dubai (UOWD) to take a more active role in promoting dialogue between Muslims and non-Muslims and helping to iron out misunderstandings of the faith.

"Organize, speak out, explain," Salwa Kader, the president of the US Federation For Middle East Peace, told the students on Wednesday. "You have to speak out. We can't all sit still."

Ms Kader, a peace activist for many years who has worked with the likes of the UN secretary general Ban Ki-moon and his predecessor, Kofi Annan, has also recently organized dialogues between Muslim and Hindu leaders in Mumbai as well as Muslim-Christian dialogues in the US.

She came to Dubai on an exploratory trip to expand the organization, which also has offices in Egypt, Pakistan and Sweden, and said the time was right to expand in the UAE. In her address, she said ignorance and a lack of understanding, as well as misconceptions and fear, had fuelled the current problems between faiths and cultures, particularly citing the fear of Islam in the US.

"What can young Muslims do? You have a voice ... most Muslims don't speak out. They leave it for God to take care of, but God gave you a mind and a voice ... you can't sit idle and blame them [non-Muslims]. They've only seen one side, the awful side."

Ms Kader, a Lebanese-American, is the director of the UN Women's Guild for Manhattan and a member of the International Alliance of Women in New York. "It's a melting pot here," she said of the UAE. "There are all these nationalities living and working together harmoniously and I think this is the best ground we can find to approach everybody without being for or against anyone, just delivering the message that we are for peace."

In September, Ms Kader was awarded the UN's Millennium Development Goals lifetime achievement award for her work. The organization, which was founded a month after 9/11 in 2001, brings together women to tackle issues such as human trafficking and domestic violence, but mainly focuses on the suffering of women affected by war and conflict.

The non-governmental organization is seeking funding to set up workshops in Dubai and begin work with young people and women around the Emirates.

Robert Watts, a 20-year-old student at UOWD, has been in the UAE for two years. He came to the university from Canada to study in a country which he said would open his eyes to more of the world and its cultures.

Mr. Watts said Ms Kader's topic of the importance of dialogue was something he first became interested in during his business ethics course.

"In this globalised world, all religions and cultures are mixing," he said. "Some of them have different values and do things differently. You can break a lot of these business barriers just by communicating."

Qadria Naji, 20, was born in the US to an American mother and Palestinian father. "I am the walking example of peace in the Middle East," she said.

"This is such an important topic and it is important that people talk more."

Ms Kader's visit follows closely on the heels of the former British prime minister, Tony Blair, whose Faith Foundation this week announced a partnership with the Higher Colleges of Technology, the first step towards establishing its inter-faith work in the region.

Rob Whelan, the president of the university, said that bringing speakers such as Ms Kader was an important way to inspire the students.

"World peace is an aspiration shared by most of the common people in the world ... It is understandably a common theme among UOWD students, where over 100 nationalities study together in harmony."

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