

World Cup can build bridges: roundtable By Catherine Jun

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By Catherine Jun
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An international panel of scholars and diplomatic figures, including East Timor Minister of Foreign Affairs Jose Ramos-Horta, participated in a roundtable discussion yesterday in Seoul and examined the World Cup's potential to unite nations and override human differences.

At the "World Cup Roundtable on Promoting Understanding among Cultures and Peoples" held at the Hilton Hotel, 16 prominent figures identified cultural stereo-types and poverty as impediments to cross-cultural understanding as well as acknowledged the symbolic value of international sports events like the World Cup. The event was organized by the Asia-Europe Foundation (ASEF) and the Korean National Commission for UNESCO (KNCU).

Following the opening address by Delfin Colomé, executive director of ASEF, the talks were mediated by Yersu Kim, Secretary General of KNCU.

With the threat of global terrorism and a dividing multiethnic world as the backdrop of the discussion, participants sought solutions to the lack of inter-cultural understanding and the

constructive role the World Cup may play in international communication.

Some participants emphasised the effectiveness of sports in erasing economic and cultural differences even if it is just on the playing field.

"It creates a utopia, a rare occasion where the poor can win against the rich, and where the U.S. is not dominant," quipped Jacques Attali, former governor of the Bank of Europe.

Other speakers emphasised the symbolic and real value of Korea and Japan's co-hosting the World Cup games. Tadashi Yamamoto, president of the Japan Centre for International Exchange, recalled the dramatic moment in the opening ceremony when the national flags of Korea and Japan were placed side by side, and called it a "victory" and a "triumph", which symbolised the increase in contact between Japanese and Korean NGOs and scholars resulting from the co-hosting by the two long-time rivals.

On the other hand, Donald Gregg, former U.S. ambassador to Korea, expressed mixed views on the effectiveness of sports in solving international conflict. He cited U.S. 'ping-pong' diplomacy with China during the Cold War as a successful example of sports' power to negotiate, but also noted the brutal sports matches between England and Ireland as an example of when sports can become a "surrogate war" between hostile countries.

Prof. Han Sung-joo of Korea University agreed that sports can both unify and divide people. "There's a galvanisation of nationalism in sports", he said, and it can have a divisive effect, like the anti-American sentiments aroused among Koreans when speed skater Kim Dong-sung was deprived the gold medal at Salt Lake City last February. But the

loyalty generated in team sports can blur national identities as well. "When Senegal won the game last night," he said, "their coach Srečko Katanec, who is French, hugged his team with all his emotions and strength, and no one would say he betrayed his nationality."

Other speakers tempered the optimistic view of effectiveness of sports in political arena. Ramos-Horta, Noble laureate for peace, was more sceptical of the role of sports in bridging different societies. "Sports can be helpful, but leadership, intellectuals, and education are what are essential to end the cycle of violence in the world", he said.

Ra Jong-yil, Korean ambassador to the United Kingdom, added that the failure to persuade North Korea to participate in the World Cup games must be remembered in the midst of celebration. In similarly sober remarks, he recalled television news image of a destitute boy assembling a soccer ball in a Third World country, and emphasised the need to be mindful that "this occasion of festivity" does not become "an occasion for glossing over the problems (the world) has."

Other participants in the round-table included Adolf Ogi, former president of Switzerland and special adviser of the U.N. Secretary-General; James Laney, former U.S. ambassador to Korea; Prof. Pan Guang from the Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences; Guy Sorman, French writer and social commentator; Prof. Wim Stokhof, director of the International Institute for Asian Studies in the Netherlands; Prof. Rosemary Foot of St. Anthony's College at Oxford, Prof. Hahn Chai-bong of Yonsei University; Prof. Han Sang-jin of Seoul National University; and Prof. Hans Koechler, president of International Progress Organisation in Austria.