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Arab cartoonists gather for 'celebration of tolerance'

By Marc Abizeid

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BEIRUT: Cartoonists representing a variety of Lebanese newspapers gathered in Beirut's Madina Theater Thursday for a discussion sponsored by the Swiss Embassy titled "How to Draw Lebanon Today," in a bid to launch a week-long exhibition at the theater featuring their collaborative works.

The discussion was hosted by Swiss The International Herald Tribune cartoonist Patrick Chappatte, who also contributed to the project which combines his work with that of eight Lebanese cartoonists hitting issues ranging from politics and religion to everyday life in Lebanon. Collages of the works were featured in The Daily Star and other Lebanese newspapers for three days earlier this week in anticipation of the exhibition.

"As you can see, it's not a formal gathering. They have long hair, they're not wearing ties," Chappatte said, describing the artists. "The work they produce isn't always viewed as very serious but at the same time, what they say is extremely serious."

Swiss Ambassador Francois Barras was also present at the event, where he gave the introduction hailing Lebanon as the leader in the Middle East in terms of journalistic freedom.

"The diversity of these cartoons is really a celebration of tolerance and of freedom of the press in Lebanon," Barras said. "I believe it must be underlined that in the domain of freedom of the press, it's like night and day when comparing Lebanon to other countries in the region."

The discussion was organized more like an interview giving Chappatte and audience members the opportunity to ask the cartoonists questions to get an insight into the rewards and challenges in their line of work. Some of the cartoonists were given sketch pads to draw caricatures as a cameraman captured the artists at work and projected the video on a screen for the audience to view.

When asked how fear influences their work, cartoonist for The Daily Star Stavro Jabra responded by saying it is common for him and his colleagues to be contacted by ministers and deputies who are upset about particular drawings, but that those pressures don't prevent them from carrying on. He added that most pressures are created not by the government, but rather by offended citizens, who write letters and make phone calls en masse in response to controversial caricatures.

"Usually, Lebanese cartoonists can draw any figure in the Arab world. We draw all the presidents, all the kings, all the authorities, all the deputies, ministers and so on," Jabra said. "But unfortunately, cartoonists in other Arab countries don't have the right to draw a single leader, king, president or anyone like that in their country or in the other Arab countries."

Religion, the artists agreed, remained the most difficult issue for them to touch upon. They described the problem of irritating sensibilities when drawing figures like Hizbullah leader Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah, who plays dual roles as both a religious and political leader.

But not all the feedback the cartoonists receive from officials or ordinary citizens is negative. Saad Hajo of As-Safir said he once received a phone call from Speaker Nabih Berri, who told him: "You don't know me, but I opened the newspapers this morning, saw your caricature and it made me laugh."

Hajo went on to tell a story of an individual attending an exhibition of his works and who became offended with a particular piece and attacked another man, mistaking him for the cartoonist.

Hassan Bleibel, cartoonist for Al-Mustaqbal, was asked by Chappatte if he ever finds himself drawing cartoons that run contrary to the political line adopted by the newspaper. He avoided the question but said disagreements over content are frequent.

"This is a common problem," Bleibel said. "But there should often be trouble and confrontations because if not, this means that we're not doing our work."