

High Level Dialogue of the General Assembly on Interreligious and Intercultural Understanding and Cooperation for Peace

Summary of the Informal Interactive Hearing with Civil Society 4 October 2007

I. Introduction

1. The General Assembly, in its resolution 61/221 of 20 December 2006, (OP. 14) decided "to convene in 2007 a high-level dialogue on interreligious and intercultural cooperation for the promotion of tolerance, understanding and universal respect on matters of freedom of religion or belief and cultural diversity, in coordination with other similar initiatives in this area".

2. In its resolution 61/269 of 25 May 2007, the General Assembly further decided that the High-level Dialogue would be held on Thursday and Friday, 4 and 5 October 2007 at the ministerial or highest possible level, and that it would consist of three plenary meetings: one in the morning of Thursday, 4 October and two on Friday, 5 October. By the same resolution, the General Assembly also decided to hold in the afternoon of 4 October 2007 an informal interactive hearing with representatives of civil society, including representatives of non-governmental organizations and the private sector, to be chaired by the President of the General Assembly.

3. The objective of the informal interactive hearing was to provide an opportunity for Member States to engage in dialogue with experts from civil society, including non-governmental organizations and the private sector representing diverse regions, cultures and perspectives, with a view to: i) strengthening efforts to promote interreligious and intercultural understanding and cooperation by engaging a variety of actors and constituencies in government, civil society and the United Nations system; ii) promoting a culture of peace and dialogue among civilizations, and advancing multi-stakeholder coalitions on related issues; and iii) translating shared values into action in order to achieve sustainable peace in the 21st Century.

4. The Office of the President of the United Nations General Assembly convened a 'Task Force' of civil society representatives to help ensure the effective participation and optimal engagement of civil society, including NGOs and the private sector, in the High-level Dialogue and interactive hearing. The Task Force helped support the Office of the President of the General Assembly in matters relating to civil society's input and identified ten panelists, ten respondents and two moderators for the interactive hearing, and provided key links to relevant civil society networks and organizations globally.

5. The President of the General Assembly, H.E. Mr. Srgjan Kerim, opened the interactive hearing which was held under the overarching theme "Interreligious and Intercultural Understanding and Cooperation for Peace". A statement was then read on behalf of the High Representative of the Secretary-General for the Alliance of Civilizations, Mr. Jorge Sampaio. The first panel discussion focused on the theme of "Challenges of Interreligious and Intercultural Cooperation Today" and was moderated by the Secretary General of the World Conference of Religions for Peace, Dr. William Vendley. The second panel discussion dealt with the theme of "Best Practices and Strategies of Interreligious and Intercultural Cooperation Going Forward" and was moderated by the Permanent Representative of Kuwait to the United Nations, H.E. Mr. Abdullah Ahmed Mohamed Al-Murad.

6. A summary of the key findings that emerged from the hearing was presented by the President of the 62nd Session of the General Assembly at the closing plenary meeting of the High-level Dialogue on 8 October. In his closing statement, the President of the General Assembly congratulated all for the stimulating discussions and thanked in particular the distinguished panelists and representatives from civil society, faith groups, academia and the private sector for enriching the debate. Commending the spirit of cooperation and mutual respect that was displayed during the High-level dialogue as something the General Assembly can continually strive to exemplify, the President underlined that sincere dialogue is an extraordinary tool to promote inclusiveness. Encouraged by the large participation of Member States in the interactive hearing, the President welcomed the interest of the General Assembly to continue this meaningful interaction with civil society on this issue and others.

II. Proceedings of the interactive hearing

1. GA Resolution 61/221 adopted on 20 December 2006, provides a good overview of the necessity for increased interreligious and intercultural understanding and cooperation for peace. It also acknowledges the importance of both freedom of religion and belief, as well as of respect for a diversity of religions and cultures.

2. The informal interactive hearing on Interreligious and Intercultural Understanding and Cooperation for Peace was the fifth hearing with civil society to be convened by the General Assembly. As each hearing is a new learning process involving different stakeholders and partners, to guarantee representativity and shared ownership, the President of the General Assembly appointed a Civil Society 'Task Force' to assist in the selection of participants and in identifying the sub-themes of the hearing. Twenty speakers represented a variety of cultural (all continents) and religious (Muslim, Christian, Jewish, Hindu, Jain, Baha'i) traditions. Thematically and professionally, participants brought forward a diverse spectrum of viewpoints and experiences, representing i.e. religious institutions, UN program partners, grassroots women's organizations, indigenous peoples networks, mediation and peace building groups and academic research centers.

3. The informal hearing was held in the afternoon of 4 October, following the Opening Plenary of the High Level Dialogue with two implications: The holding of the hearing during the High-level Dialogue enabled a high level of attendance of Member States. As the time that could be allotted to the hearing as part of the two-day Dialogue agenda was limited to one afternoon session of three hours, multiple delegates who asked for the floor could not be accommodated in the set time frame.

4. There was a shared sense of appreciation and achievement, with regard to both the relevance of the sub-themes and the diversity and representativity of the participants from civil society, religious communities, academia and the private sector. The discussion was very rich, bringing together a wide variety of backgrounds, experiences, cultures, religions and views.

5. All speakers recognized that interfaith and intercultural understanding form the bedrock of our well-being, stability and prosperity, and recommended practical measures to advance interreligious and intercultural cooperation, including through programmes for youth, education, media, and the promotion of rights of minorities through innovative and inclusive dialogue.

First Panel

6. The first panel discussion dealt with the 'Challenges of Interreligious and Intercultural Cooperation Today', and opened with an analysis of how religion is used to fuel conflicts, as well as recommendations for the steps that could be undertaken to foster meaningful interreligious dialogue and respect. The first panel also highlighted successful experiences at the grassroots.

- The Representative of the L'auravetli'an Information and Education Network of Indigenous Peoples of Russia described efforts to provide information and education to twenty minority groups, and related to their advocacy work to operationalize new legislation in the field and change education curricula to value and foster indigenous culture and tradition.
- The Representative of the Union Theological Seminary emphasized that before religions can move to making positive contributions to peacebuilding, they must confront why it is that religion is such a ready tool to foster conflict and violence.
- The Representative of the International Islamic Center for Population Studies and Research at the Al Azhar University in Cairo illustrated how work in the field of women's health and reproductive rights has been furthered in the Islamic world over the past 30 years.
- The Representative of the Interfaith Mediation Centre of Nigeria stressed the power of religion which can be used to raise the consciousness of humanity or manipulated to foster violence and extremism, and recommended locally appropriate peace building training for youth and other constituencies.
- The Representative of the Anuvrat Global Organization underscored the role of economic disparities and globalization in fuelling tensions and pointed to the positive impact of non-violent approaches such as Ahimsa Yatra in India to create a positive climate for dialogue.

7. The Respondent from the Foundation for a Culture of Peace noted the role of the media and irresponsible leadership in perpetrating stereotypes that generate fear and suspicion, thereby generating the perception of a "clash of civilizations". The Respondent from the Inter Press Service International Association cautioned the role of the media in contributing to tensions by incomplete or inaccurate reporting. The Respondent from the National Peace Council of the Philippines called on leaders to promote interreligious and intercultural cooperation by honoring their commitments to achieving the Millennium Development Goals, and by adhering to the principles enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The Respondent from the Women's Ministries of the Latin American Council of Churches recommended the use of Human Rights language to address the challenges of religious traditions, notably in the context of gender equality and justice. The Respondent from Infogest, Senegal demonstrated that the world of business provides ample opportunities for peaceful, multicultural interaction and success.

8. During the interactive dialogue with Member States, Permanent Observers and the UN System that followed, it was emphasized that understanding between religions was not an end unto itself, but rather a step towards greater cohesion among diverse communities. Participants were reminded that despite a willingness to engage in forums such as these, in reality freedom of belief and religion is still not guaranteed and protected in many countries. Recommendations included: i) Encouraging support at the national level to render local action plans more successful (as proven by the experience of the Philippines in developing and introducing peacebuilding classes in all school curricula); ii) Providing a role for government and civil society to conduct "media policing work"; iii) Conducting training in intercultural sensitivity, and placing members of a given religious or ethnic community at the forefront of efforts to promote peace within that community; and iv) creating national interfaith networks to foster new experts in interfaith dialogue.

Second Panel

9. The second panel discussion addressed the theme of "Best Practices and Strategies of Interreligious and Intercultural Cooperation Going Forward". Panelists shared their work on interfaith dialogue, conflict resolution, peacebuilding, and MDG policy development, and provided examples of successful practices for wider application.

- The Representative of the Islamic College for Advanced Studies/Religions of the Sacred Heart described methods for achieving inner peace and freedom from fear, in order to transform personal and social energies towards communion, noting that "Peace is intelligence of the heart".
- The Representative of the Tanenbaum Center for Interreligious Understanding underscored the success of their network of interfaith mediators in armed conflict zones, whose high risk, discreet, and yet effective work can serve as a guide for policy makers working with religious leaders in areas of armed conflict.
- The Representative of the Comunidad Teologica de Honduras highlighted the importance of inclusive interreligious dialogue, such as those convened with UNFPA's assistance in Central America on population planning and women's health, and noted that this dialogue model helped to build an active interreligious network on a variety of issues, including environmental protection.
- The Representative of the Baha'i International Community in Tanzania underscored that the freedom to hold belief of one's choosing and to change it, was an essential attribute of the human conscience, and recommended concrete strategies to overcome ignorance and fanaticism.
- The Representative of Weyerhaeuser Company shared that the promotion of diversity demands a mindset geared towards collaborative leadership and offered the experience of private sector partnerships with civil society and NGOs in developing countries as a model for effective collaboration.

10. The Respondent from the Centre for Women's Studies and Intervention of Nigeria underscored the global importance of addressing women's equality, and urged men, as custodians of religious traditions, to play an active role in women's empowerment. The Respondent from the UNESCO Chair in Interfaith Studies posed the challenge of moving beyond either an exclusively secular education with little knowledge about diverse religious traditions, or, on the other hand, a religious education that advocates one religion above all others. The Respondent from the Earth Charter emphasized the promotion of global ethics as a unifying strategy in the midst of religious and cultural diversity, building on the UN Charter and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and offered the methodology of the Earth Charter as a useful model in this regard. The Respondent from the Peace Boat, Japan, urged all stakeholders to engage in open dialogue about wounds from the past in order to create the conditions for genuine interreligious and intercultural cooperation moving forward. The Respondent from Zenab for Women in Development, Sudan, stressed the need for the international community to implement the protection of religious minorities and support grassroots dialogue initiatives, including the training of religious and community leaders in programmes for reconciliation.

11. During the interactive dialogue with Member States, Permanent Observers, and the UN System that followed, various delegations articulated proposals for action including i) The establishment of a UN body with the specific mandate of heightening the level of interfaith dialogue, and bringing together experts on interfaith dialogue; ii) The reallocation by Member States of a portion of defense budgets, towards interfaith dialogue initiatives designed to build peace; iii) Encouraging religious communities to hold internal dialogues, in order to identify and engage the extreme elements within one's own religious tradition in support of peace; iv) The introduction of mandatory interfaith education which would foster understanding of one's own

religious traditions as well as that of others; v) Engaging the media to promote understanding rather than stereotypes and prejudice. The momentum around interreligious dialogue was noted by many participants, including the Holy See, referring to the initiatives of the late Pope John Paul II, and of Pope Benedict XVI.

III. Key findings

The following points highlight the findings and recommendations that emerged from the hearing:

(a) *Globalization* has heightened the need for greater cooperation and understanding among cultures, religions, and civilizations. Interreligious and Intercultural Cooperation is a prerequisite for international peace and security.

(b) *The UN must continue to play a central role* in promoting the Culture of Peace, human rights, human security and multi-stakeholder cooperation. To that end, the UN should enhance its efforts to foster meaningful interreligious and intercultural dialogue, including through a 'Decade of Dialogue', and by developing permanent programmes or mechanisms specifically focusing on interreligious and intercultural dialogue for peace.

(c) *Non-state actors must be involved in this process.* While Member States are the UN's building blocks, non-state actors are very active and influential partners for a global alliance for peace, as they build bridges between communities. Partnerships with people working at the grassroots are of key importance to the UN. The new forms of cooperation that are emerging between the private sector and civil society could also provide new models for best practices.

(d) *Religious communities* have a unique spiritual and moral authority and should play a more prominent role in achieving international peace and developing a common language for peace. Valuable lessons can be learned from the experience gathered by interreligious organizations, humanists and other civil society groups in this area for over a century.

(e) *Indigenous and minority groups need to be included.* While the adoption of the Declaration on the Protection and Promotion of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples last September pays tribute to the inherent value of human diversity and to the strength of the indigenous movement globally, mechanisms to protect minority rights tend to be weak. Political will is necessary to ensure respect for the rights of indigenous peoples and other groups, including migrant workers, to land, ethnic diversity, and cultural and religious traditions. The inclusion of minority groups in intercultural dialogue should be a priority.

(f) *Examples of peaceful multicultural societies:* There are many examples of culturally and religiously diverse communities living in harmony for centuries. Lessons can be learned from these experiences, including those at the local level, as they provide important models to be applied in the current context of globalization.

(g) *Deadly conflict and freedom of religion:* The failure to reach sustainable solutions to conclude long-standing conflicts in the Middle East and Africa deeply affects interreligious understanding and cooperation. While the UN has made great progress in monitoring instances of religious repression, in many countries, freedom of religion or belief continues to be violated and actions do not go beyond vague recommendations calling on governments and religions to be more responsible and self critical.

(h) *Religious extremism and inclusive dialogue*: One of the key reasons why religions are prone to violence is that some claim to be superior over others in holding the highest of truths. Such claims tacitly allow perpetrators to use religion for violent purposes, engaging hatred and mobilizing constituencies. Solutions lie in religions working together, acknowledging the extreme elements within their own constituencies and adopting a self-critical approach towards teachings which may incite discrimination and intolerance.

(i) *Human rights*: Inclusive dialogues cannot succeed if, in the interests of "harmony", there are taboos about addressing violations of fundamental freedoms. Human Rights language and instruments have proven to be successful tools to address contentious cultural and religious traditions.

(j) *Freedom from want*: One of the primary objectives of the United Nations' collaboration with religious communities should be to relieve the suffering of people living in poverty and achieve the timely implementation of the Millennium Development Goals. The connection between human rights and poverty eradication must be recognized in order to protect human dignity.

(k) *Media*: The prominent role of the media in generating perceptions of other cultures and religions needs to be acknowledged in a world driven by communications technology, where perception tends to override reality and facts. It is important to strike a balance between freedom of expression and the responsibility of the media to exercise judgment and respect in representing cultural and religious communities.

(l) *Education*: Universal curricula on multiculturalism, interreligious cooperation and peacebuilding should be introduced in primary and secondary schools. Quality education should focus on building cohesion and common understanding in society, rather than promoting a specific religion. Successful grassroots peacebuilding and dialogue models require further study to develop innovative training approaches for youth, i.e., the Andalusia model and the Peace Boat.

(m) *Other recommendations*: Among the objectives of a United Nations body designed to promote interreligious and intercultural cooperation could be the systematic collection and dissemination of successful grassroots dialogue experiences and the development of a code of conduct based on global ethics. The approach of the Earth Charter provides an interesting example. Recognizing that peaceful relations among cultures and religions are an important security measure, governments should be encouraged to allocate part of their defense budgets to interfaith dialogue mechanisms.