

Input to UN General Assembly High-level Meeting on Youth

(UN Headquarters New York, 25 and 26 July 2011)

Name and contact information of your organization

RFYN (Religious Freedom Youth Network) of the
International Association for Religious Freedom (IARF)
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Number of youth represented: 2,000

100-word description of your organization.

Young adults (ages 18-35) have been involved in achieving IARF's main vision and goals since 2001, working as "RFYN" (Religious Freedom Youth Network) in specific IARF programmes and projects, at local & national, regional and international levels.

RFYN has been a major partner in implementing the IARF's Human Rights Education (HRE) project in, India, Bangladesh & Philippines. It has also organized international seminars on Human Rights & the Right to Freedom of Religion & Beliefs: the first was in the Netherlands (2007) in partnership with the IARF Dutch Chapter, the second in Jordan (2008) with the Youth Spirit Centre, an RFYN member organization, the third in India (2009) with our India Chapter.

INPUT TO HIGH-LEVEL MEETING: "The role of youth in the progress of Afghanistan"

by Jafar Askandary, Romal Abdulla & Zabihullah Kamran

Youth are the backbone of any nation, a vital tool for any nation if used with caution and discretion. But their strengths are the very reason warlords and terrorists can use them to their own advantage. They scout and recruit them because without youth they are nothing, and with them they are everything. Hence governments need to reach underutilized youth before others do, and deploy them as an effective means for development and prosperity.

Youth form nearly 68 percent of Afghanistan's population but are deprived of participation in many cases. Three decades of war have meant that they have been almost completely forgotten. Only after the removal of the Taliban did young men and especially women get the chance to utilize themselves. But lack of experienced leadership means our new democratic government is unable to tackle the problems of unemployment, education, poverty, malnutrition, illegal opium trading. So the youth remain on the sidelines with no work, driving them to fulfill their needs by illegal and immoral means.

Moreover, blood feuds and revenge killing for honor — prominent in Afghanistan from time immemorial — have become a low-level civil war that has brought much social instability and insecurity, through widespread thievery, kidnapping for ransom, and looting, all worsened by the resulting onset of poverty. Sons, husbands and brothers went off to fight battles leaving impoverished women and children to die of starvation. In 1994, all utilities were destroyed, hundreds of thousands died, and many more suffer to date. Each household can tell its story of misery or tragedy.

United Nations provides enormous funds to Afghanistan for development, hunger relief, etc. but nobody knows where they go. The situation seems to remain the same. Lack of transparency and high levels of corruption are deep-rooted, with people having no authority to keep government in check. While rich officials get richer, the poor and needy drown deeper in poverty. One dies from suicide bombing, another is killed by village feuds or honor killing. After a decade of so-called life-changing democracy, 8 million people still suffer food shortage, and there are over 500,000 disabled orphans. Only last winter over 150 children died in tents by frostbite and hypothermia. Such preventable tragedies take place every day in different ways.

Even with the lack of infrastructure and aid from the government, youth have emerged strongly in different areas, holding their nation's head high — for example in the up-and-coming national cricket team. They have shown that the youth do not need billions of dollars — like the corrupt government officials — to lift their country's profile in the world. All they need is mutual understanding and belief in each other, love of country, and pride in who they are and where they come from. Only the youth has the power to change the face of a nation ridden with decades of civil strife, and they — with proper assistance and guidance from national and international spheres — can make Afghanistan a model democracy.

The youth of Afghanistan can play a crucial role in eradicating linguistic, racial, regional, tribal, religious and gender related discriminations, by helping create an atmosphere that promotes the culture of peace, national unity and mutual respect amongst the peoples of Afghanistan.

PRINCIPLES:

- 1.** Strive towards creation of a knowledgeable, broadminded and diligent youth in Afghanistan's post-war recovery, and a suitable role for them in the development process. Practical steps should be taken to move beyond simple sloganeering, to involve youth and women in consultations on specific issues of development.
- 2.** Involve youth in support for human rights, specially the rights of women and of children, and preservation of ethnic and linguistic diversity.

Some solutions towards youth development

1. Form youth organizations free from political and religious affiliations. Youth councils should be formed in all parts of Afghanistan, at the level of villages, provinces, etc. Special attention to be given to gender balance, and a privileged position for the voices of young women.
2. Assistance and guidance for such youth organizations from national and international experts working for youth, as government has many problems (corruption, inefficiency, etc.). They should gain international recognition by participating in international events and conferences. (Currently, wherever international opportunities occur, youth cannot easily get visas, and conferences are not held in countries which badly need the publicity and awareness).

Both the above will help build bridges between Afghan youth themselves, and with activist youth around the globe, in order to introduce the country's diverse youth — their abilities, skills and limitations — and help develop them.

3. Develop educational content targeted at helping youth realize the importance of unity, cooperation, mutual understanding and togetherness. This will encourage them to fulfill their responsibility towards social integrity by helping each other.
4. Encourage the educated Afghan young adults living in exile to repatriate and help develop the country.