

**Report to the “Multi-Faith Coalition on Partnering with the United Nations” on a meeting 7 March 2013 sponsored by the Republic of Kazakhstan, FICIR (Forum Intercultural & Interreligious) and IARF (International Association for Religious Freedom) during the 22nd session of the Human Rights Council at the United Nations, Geneva**

**Dr. John Taylor (IARF), Vice-Chair** of the Steering Committee of the ‘Multi-Faith Coalition’ presided over the session. He introduced the meeting with some relevant remarks: IARF, an interfaith NGO, is over 100 years old. Some major religions criticize interfaith activities and ‘praying together’. But the United Nations considers interfaith work necessary e.g. the conventions against Discrimination and the appointment of a Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion and Belief. He noted the ‘Rabat Plan of Action’ to remove incitement to hatred and to implement Human Rights Council resolution No. 16/18. This year the Special Rapporteur had stressed the importance of minorities and the cultural diversity within the Great Religions.

The ‘Multi-faith Coalition’ mainly NGOs, stresses collaboration among themselves and with the UN within the context of the United Nations. About 60 NGOs are involved, of which 30 are active. Financial support comes from all participants in the Coalition.

**Dr. Gerardo Gonzalez , coordinator** of the ‘Multi-faith Coalition’ sent the following message (read by Charles Graves)

Dear partners,

Allow me calling you “partners” although I am far away in this moment, somewhere in Latin America, because I guess that all of you are today in this room interested –as well as me—in the theme of this meeting: multi-faith partnership with the United Nations. We all share some key values and ideals and would like to work together for making them true. All of us are actual or potential partners in this venture.

“Partnership” has been a key concept for this initiative since its beginning. When on May 2004 a small group of 15 people from diverse spiritual traditions and associated to different faith and value-based organizations gathered at the Chateau de Bossey, not far from this venue, for designing and promoting the creation by the United Nations of a permanent “UN Interreligious Forum for World Peace”, we named our group as “Partnership Committee”. Some of its members are now in this room.

Few years later, Kofi Annan, at that time UN Secretary-General, let us know that our proposal was not politically viable within the UN. So, following his advice, we change the format of our proposal from a permanent body to a “UN decade”, with clear limits over time, while keeping its heart, which means:

cooperation, partnership, towards shared values and goals dealing with sustainable peace. Therefore, on January 2008, in a tripartite consultation, again at the Chateau de Bossey, we launched the Initiative for a “UN Decade of Interreligious Dialogue and Cooperation for Peace”. At that meeting we also started forming a Coalition of faith and value-based organizations to support and promote this Initiative, which was formally established on March 2009 in a meeting held at Maryknoll, near New York.

Unfortunately –or perhaps fortunately, you never know—this new strategic approach, after two internal consultations among the member states, failed to find unanimous support within the UN General Assembly. So, again, an attractive proposal supported by many, showed to have limited political viability.

At present we are engaged in a third attempt. We are trying to learn from previous experiences; so, we are making pristinely clear that our focus is on transformative partnerships for sustainable peace. Consequently, we are not trying to create any platform for increasing the political power of religions and religious leaders within the UN system, as apparently some member states thought with regard to the previous proposals, or that we would like to involve the UN in inter-religious dialogues dealing with theological issues or ethical paradigms. So, what we are presenting now as a seed idea to SG Ban Ki-moon, to be developed and launched by him as his own initiative is a “UN Multi-faith Global Partnership”.

We are talking about a possible new Secretary-General’s initiative, inspired in the already successfully implemented organizational model of the UN Global Compact, which would offer an institutional umbrella for strengthening and widening the already existing programs of cooperation between UN agencies and faith-based organizations, as well as for developing new partnerships which may learn from accumulated experiences. And when we refer to accumulated experiences we have in mind the amazing and highly appreciated work done by FBOs in cooperation with UN agencies in fields such as combating AIDs pandemic, promoting and implementing the specific rights of children and women, providing humanitarian assistance to refugees, displaced people and victims of human traffic, and preventing or solving inter-ethnic conflicts.

We are talking of progressively developing a network of networks able to implement transformative partnerships at field level with significant social impact. We have in mind an open-ended incremental initiative able to better mobilizing the amazingly large amount of moral, organizational and human resources of religiously inspired communities and organizations in partnership with the UN and its member states.

Another characteristic of this suggested seed idea is that this global partnership, as well as the various specific partnerships that are expected to grow within its framework, would be based on a set of moral commitments freely endorsed by all its partners both at the UN side and at the civil society side. What we are suggesting to the Secretary General is primarily a moral undertaking aimed at constructing a human society based on shared values such as justice, solidarity,

compassion, appreciation of social diversity in full respect of Human Rights, as well as living in harmony with the community of life in our shared and only house: the planet Earth.

It sound very ambitious, nevertheless we think that it is technically feasible and politically viable if we conceived it as an incremental process, supported by a wide and diverse global partnership solidly rooted at community level while interconnected at national, regional and global levels.

A globalized world asks for --and at the same time make possible-- a globalized action; a transformative partnership bringing together the United Nations and a key strategic sector of the civil society, as the faith-inspired and value based organizations are. United we can do it.

I invite all of you and your organizations to join us in this challenging venture aimed at contributing to sustainable peace in the World.

Thank you for your kind attention

Dr. Gerardo Gonzalez

Executive Secretary

Multi-faith Coalition for Partnering with the United Nations

Bogota, Colombia, 2 March 2013.

**Mr. Yerlan Alimbayev, counselor, Kazakhstan Permanent Mission to the United Nations in Geneva,** made the following statement (summary)

He noted the meetings for leaders of World and Traditional Religions (in particular the 2012 Congress in Astana, capital of Kazakhstan).

He noted the initiatives of President Nazarbayev for global and regional security and to settle conflicts emphasizing always intercultural aspects. At the 2012 Congress leaders from 40 countries came to Astana and discussed the role of religious leaders in promoting development, for religious and multi-cultural activities, regarding religions with women and youth etc. The Congress made a joint appeal for interfaith dialogue and a ‘Council’ of Religious Leaders was established (36 persons). Each had the responsibility to identify priorities and mechanisms for interreligious and intercultural dialogue. It is hoped at the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary (September 2013) of this initiative of Kazakhstan that our ‘Multi-Faith Coalition’ be a participant.

He noted the work of Kazakhstan to promote regional dialogue through its presidency of the OSCE and OIC - in which the emphasis has been to foster tolerance and combat discrimination. He also noted the multitude of associations and ‘centers’ within Kazakhstan – more than 4000 which represents 20 times the number of such groups extant in the 1990s. Old religious sites have been renovated; a new Roman Catholic cathedral has been built, the largest mosque in Central Asia has been constructed.

His government will actively contribute to the work of the Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion and Belief within the Human Rights Council activities,

**Imam Maytham Al-Salman, director, Bahrain Interfaith Center** noted the desire of his organization to play an active role in the ‘Multi-Faith Coalition’. He believes that religion should never be the cause for violence. He mentioned that in his country the interreligious situation has been complicated since February 2011, influenced by the political changes in Tunisia and Egypt. His Center has a strategy to manage sectarian differences in Bahrain – there are, in fact, 7 different sects of Islam.

He noted also that prior to the 1970s-1980s there were no Constitutions in then Gulf Region and even today none in Saudi Arabia. The basic loyalties are directed to the tribes for the most part and to the sects. But the major problem in Bahrain is between the government and the opposition. The government has expelled 4000 Shi’a Muslims from their jobs. A discrimination exists not necessarily between Sunnis and Shi’a, yet sectarian violence is occurring. 38 mosques have been demolished by the government and President Obama has expressed sadness over the present Bahraini situation and the King has called for their re-building (up to today only 21% have been rebuilt).

Our Interfaith Center promotes ‘religious neutrality’ We also support churches in Bahrain.

Imam al-Salman noted that in the Human Rights Council Switzerland supported a statement on human rights in Bahrain – for respect of United Nations principles and an end to sectarianism. Also 44 countries (including the USA and U.K.) signed a statement demanding respect for religious rights in Bahrain.

### **Comments and Questions / contributions of ‘Coalition’ members**

**Mr. Handschin (Universal Peace Federation)** asked Mr. Alimbayev to explain about the rights of religious minorities in Kazakhstan.

Mr. Alimbayev replied that world traditional religions, and in fact all religions and local minorities are respected.

**Mr. Firsch Kitcher** (Human Rights Council secretariat) asked why it had taken so long for the Human Rights Council to take an interest in inter-religious dialogue and why Kazakhstan was taking this initiative.

Mr. Alimbayev answered that already in 1992 at the UN General Assembly Kazakhstan announced its intentions in this matter but it took 10 years for the first Conference to be held. Kazakhstan is a multi-cultural country with over 40 different religious confessions – incl. Zoroastrians, Hindus, Russian Orthodox , Russian Orthodox ‘Old Believers’, etc. The intention is to preserve stability through dialogue. Then Kazakhstan decided to share its experience in this domaine with other countries. After its 3<sup>rd</sup> Congress it decided to establish the ‘Council of Religious Leaders – with the first session in September 2013.

**Mr. Trevor Davies**, representative in Geneva of the **Anglican Consultative Council** noted the lack of female on today’s panel but mentioned that the representatives of the Indigenous Peoples Ancestral Spiritual Council and of the World Young Women’s Christian Association (YWCA) in the ‘Coalition’ would have been present except for other conflicting meetings.

He said that the Anglican Consultative Council comprised representatives of 38 Archbishops of the Anglican Church covering 162 different countries – these represented 80 million people, headed by the Archbishop of Canterbury. The newly-elected Archbishop would be installed into his office in March 2013.

Anglican Consultative Council works through ‘ networks’ of which there are 12 in number, covering such issues as: health (many Anglican hospitals in the world), peace and justice, universities and colleges (120 in the world), environment, refugees and migrants, interfaith concerns, family concerns, women’s concerns etc. The Anglican Archbishops at the last ten year Lambeth Conference called for the establishment of an “Anglican Alliance for Development”, not a fund raising agency but related to grassroots education and empowerment, where local people take action in a constructive way. He noted that this Alliance has now established with the British ‘Open University’ a long-distance learning programme using the internet. This past year there were applicants from over 40 countries.

Mr. Davis pointed out the relevance of the “Global Survey for a Better World” whereby MDG’s (Middle Development Goal nations) report on topics such as education, health, transport, waste clearing etc. He warmly recommended the idea of a coalition for Networks as proposed as it was an effective way of bringing change. He believed that the “Multi-faith Coalition” was an example of how networks could remain in touch with each other and expand their influence.

**Mr. Abdoulaye Lélouma Diallo** (external consultant of **International Labour Office (ILO)**) raised the question of the relevance of the ‘Coalition’ and its work to the concerns of young people and women (70% of the economy in Africa). He stressed the inter-generational aspect of the work.

**Mr. Hans Handschen** (Universal Peace Federation) noted the support of the Philippines for Interfaith work within the UN.

**Mr. Trevor Davies** noted the work of the NGO Committee entitled “Spiritual Values and Global Concerns” a sub-committee of CONGO (Committee of Non-Governmental Organisations with consultative status in the United Nations). He mentioned that efforts of the Human Rights Council to deal with Interfaith matters (the European Union was opposed) has been largely unsuccessful although ‘common values’ are integral part of the United Nations conventions and Charter.

**Dr. John Taylor** noted that the Secretary General of the UN believed in ‘partnership models’ with groups such as our “Multi-Faith Coalition for Partnership with the United Nations”. Already bi-lateral arrangements are being made along this line and our ‘Coalition’ can ‘sow seeds of ideas for the UN’.

**Mr. Firsch Kitcher** said that a ‘pastor once refused to go to an interfaith meeting because he was under the impression that the subject matter would be theology’. But ‘interfaith education’ (i.e. education in interfaith dialogue and cooperation) is very constructive – expressing what is common in different faiths. The UN is a product of ‘wishful thinking’ and it needs to devote itself to questions how to solve religious conflict.

**Imam Al-Salman** believed that religion is not being portrayed in media and society in the right manner. Religion should be used to support harmony simply because it is linked to the cultural diversity of society. These cultures must mature up to civilized status and also states must become democratic. It is difficult to defeat discrimination and there is a definite correlation between the cultural level and religion being used for peace.

**Mr. Trevor Davies** called for a deepening of ‘networking’. He believed youth was interested in value-oriented initiatives, but he noted that banking is subject to corruption in many countries. He stressed the importance of values e.g. honesty.

**Dr. Charles Graves (Interfaith International**, member of the Steering Committee of the Coalition) read a report on the activities and publications of the *Sindh Sufi Institute* (Pakistan) whose president - Mr. Khadim Hussein Soomro of Karachi – is interested in the work of the ‘Multi-Faith Coalition’. A few details: the Sindh Sufi Institute is offshoot of *Bazame-e Sufiaie Sindh* organised by G.M. Sayed in 1966. The Sindh Sufi Institute is working for civil liberties and Interfaith Harmony. The Institute organizes seminars and has published material on Sufi philosophy. Some the published books are:

*My Vision of Religion* by G.M. Sayed

*Shah Latif and His Message* by G.M. Sayed

*Sufis of Indus Valley* by Khadim Hussain Soomro

*Karachi A City of Interfaith and Tolerance* -

*Sufi Speeches of Khadim Hussain Soomro* - Compiled by Younis Alam

*Sufi Shah Inayat A champion of Civil liberties and Interfaith Harmony*

**Sponsors of the meeting participated: Mr. Biro Diawara**, representative in Geneva at the United Nations of **RADDHO** (*Rencontre africaine pour la defense des Droits de l’Homme*); **Dr. Abdel Amir Hashom**, representative in Geneva at the United Nations of the **Al-Hakim Foundation**. These organizations and Interfaith International are founding members of FICIR.

Several persons (some not present) including **Ms. Beatrix Schulthess (Indigenous Peoples Ancestral Spiritual Council**, member of the Steering Committee of the Multifaith Coalition); **Mr. & Mrs. Donald Holsinger (International Center for Law and Religion Studies of Brigham Young University)**(present at the meeting); **Mr. Ajit Singh MBE and Mrs. Charanjit Ajit Singh of International Interfaith Centre** (Oxford, UK); and **Ms. Ishtar Adler (Llama Gangchen World Peace Foundation and** member of the Steering Committee of the Multi-faith Coalition), requested copies of the proceedings.

Charles Graves  
18 March 2013