



THE PRESIDENT  
OF THE  
GENERAL ASSEMBLY

12 September 2007

Excellency,

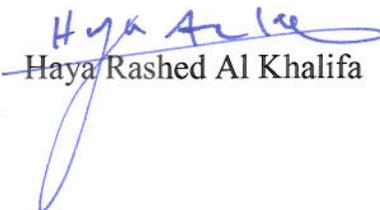
I wish to refer to a letter of the Office of the President of the General Assembly dated 15 August 2007, transmitting a list of proposed speakers, respondents and moderators at the Informal Interactive Hearing of the General Assembly on Interreligious and Intercultural Understanding and Cooperation for Peace, to be held in the afternoon of 4 October 2007 in connection with the High-level Dialogue on 4 and 5 October. In that letter, Member States were kindly requested to consider the list and provide their comments, if any, by Wednesday 29 August 2007.

In this connection, please find enclosed for your information a tentative programme of the High-level Dialogue and the Informal Interactive Hearing with Civil Society, as well as the list of speakers and respondents for the latter.

In order to facilitate discussions at the Informal Interactive Hearing with Civil Society, please find attached a concept paper which I trust will provide useful background information for this event.

Once again, I wish to invite your government to participate at the ministerial or highest possible level, and look forward to your cooperation and active participation.

Please accept, Excellency, the assurances of my highest consideration.

  
Haya Rashed Al Khalifa

All Permanent Representatives and  
Permanent Observers to the United Nations  
New York

## Concept Note

### Informal Interactive Hearing with Civil Society

#### 2007 High-level Dialogue of the General Assembly on Interreligious and Intercultural Understanding and Cooperation for Peace

##### Background:

On 25 May 2007, the General Assembly adopted draft resolution A/61/L.60 entitled "High-level Dialogue on Interreligious and Intercultural Understanding and Cooperation for Peace". The Office of the President of the United Nations General Assembly has convened a 'Task Force' of civil society representatives to help ensure the effective participation of civil society, including non-governmental organizations and the private sector, in the High-level Dialogue, scheduled to be held on 4 and 5 October 2007.

The great need for *Interreligious and Intercultural Understanding and Cooperation for Peace* is a theme that has attracted increased attention amongst governments, UN agencies, religious communities, spiritual movements, civil society and humanists at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

The effects of globalization processes, international travel and migration, the fast-expanding capacities of communication, tensions amongst diverse ethnic and religious groups, the realities of war, worldwide threats of terrorism, and the grave consequences of global climate change, have all highlighted the urgent need to deepen the cooperation and understanding between cultures, religions, and civilizations. Multi-stakeholder partnerships need to be developed to respond effectively to these global crises, enabling the shared engagement of very diverse constituencies.

The General Assembly Resolution A/61/221 entitled "Promotion of interreligious and intercultural dialogue, understanding and cooperation for peace" adopted on 20 December 2006 by all Member States provides a good introduction to the theme of interreligious and intercultural understanding and cooperation for peace, acknowledging the importance of freedom of religion and belief as well as emphasizing the need for respect for a diversity of religions and cultures.

The United Nations has a long record of defending freedom of religion and belief as a fundamental human right and a foundation for peace and justice. First stated by the global community in Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, this right was given the force of international law by the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. In 1981 the United Nations General Assembly adopted the Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief.

In addition, the many interreligious and intercultural initiatives and activities that religious communities, interreligious organizations, humanists and other civil society organizations have been conducting in an organized manner now for over a century need to be acknowledged and lessons learned from this rich history. While the amount of organized intercultural and interreligious activities has continued to increase through the last century, this has not been able to

significantly diminish or stop violence and discrimination taking place as a result of misuse of religious sentiments and loyalties.

Social, economic, environmental, and territorial issues are often the underlying reasons for conflicts and tensions, which are then aggravated and exploited by extremists manipulating the loyalties and grievances of diverse cultural, ethnic or religious groups. The UN system and its agencies, as well as other multilateral institutions and regional bodies, are addressing now this complex set of challenges and are seeking ways forward, in order to find policies, structures and programmes that can acknowledge and respond to the multiple causes as well as the interdependencies of the current crises we are facing concerning the above outlined issues.

### **Objectives:**

The High-Level Dialogue and its informal Interactive Hearing aim to strengthen efforts of interreligious and intercultural understanding and cooperation by engaging a variety of actors and constituencies, especially in government, civil society and the United Nations system. These three parties have also been at the core of the Tripartite Forum on Interfaith Cooperation for Peace formed after the 2005 Conference on Interfaith Cooperation for Peace. The High-level Dialogue further seeks to promote a culture of peace and dialogue among civilizations, advance multi-stakeholder coalitions, including with the private sector on related issues, further strengthen the Alliance of Civilizations initiative, and translate shared values into action in order to achieve sustainable peace in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

These objectives are also built on a diverse series of activities and initiatives undertaken by religious NGOs, interreligious organizations and various UN agencies especially over the last two decades. The most widely publicized UN initiatives include, inter alia, the UNESCO *Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity* (2001), the UNFPA *Culture Matters* (2004) and the Report of the *Alliance of Civilizations* (2006). Another notable resource is the *Final Document of the International Consultative Conference on School Education in Relation with Freedom of Religion or Belief, Tolerance and Non-Discrimination* of the Madrid Conference (2001).

Similarly, the General Assembly held on 10 and 11 May 2007 an informal Thematic Debate on 'Civilizations and the Challenge for Peace: obstacles and opportunities' to explore the reasons behind the growing level of mistrust between people of different religions and cultures; and to examine how and why cultural and religious differences increasingly fuel, and are used to justify, conflicts.

As a means of stimulating discussion during the Interactive Civil Society Hearing on the afternoon of 4 October 2007 toward the achievement of the above-mentioned objectives, the following guiding questions are offered for consideration:

Questions for the 1st Panel, "Challenges of Interreligious & Intercultural Cooperation Today"

- Who are the 'main actors' of interreligious and intercultural cooperation across all sectors (civil society, government, UN) today? What does it mean to be a 'main actor'?
- What are the current modalities of interreligious and intercultural cooperation? How has it changed markedly from the past since the onset of globalization? How can we characterize regional differences?
- What are the most pressing current issues and greatest barriers to successful interreligious and intercultural cooperation that the 'main actors' face today?
- What are the relations between culture & religion? Is there a widely accepted relation or does it depend on context, historical and local differences?

Questions for the 2nd Panel, "Best Practices & Strategies for Interreligious & Intercultural Cooperation Going Forward"

- What are some examples of successful interreligious and intercultural cooperation today, locally, regionally, globally? What elements/aspects of these examples can be applied to other contexts, regions, faiths, ethical traditions?
- How can the 'main actors' strengthen interreligious and intercultural cooperation in the future (i.e. what modalities, processes and institutional arrangements can be found)?
- How can the interaction between the 'main actors', programmes, and initiatives for interreligious and intercultural cooperation in the UN system context be better coordinated, enabling more cohesion and synergies (for example, as called for in A/RES/61/221)?

**Outcomes:**

The desired outcomes of the High-Level Dialogue and its informal Interactive Hearing are not only to build upon, but also to develop further the outcomes of key conferences and initiatives mentioned in General Assembly resolution A/61/221 and under the 'Objectives' section of this concept note. While some outcome proposals (see some selected examples below) made at earlier conferences have already been implemented, much work yet remains to widen and strengthen the network of participating actors, to more effectively institutionalize their work with and through the UN, to significantly raise the level of political support and resources committed, and to dramatically increase the number and quality of ground-level implementation projects underway.

For example, following the conclusion of the 2005 Conference on Interfaith Cooperation for Peace held at UN headquarters, the outcome on strategies to enhance interfaith cooperation towards peace was transmitted to the President of the 59th Session of the General Assembly as input to the High Level Plenary Meeting in September 2005. In the search for cohesion, cooperation and further

development, building on past conferences as well as other like minded initiatives, it is helpful to recall some of the then (2005) intended outcomes:

- An expansion and deepening of the relationship between the United Nations and civil society, including religious nongovernmental organizations;
- Practical actions in the fields of education and the media in order to foster understanding, tolerance and cooperation between peoples of different religions and beliefs so as to overcome intolerance and combat stereotypes and misperceptions, with particular reference to the Programme of Action under the Global Agenda for the Dialogue Among Civilizations (2001);
- The formation of an open-ended tripartite group composed of representatives from Member States, the United Nations system, and non-governmental organizations to follow these issues through mechanisms already available in the United Nations system but also by identifying new ways to address interreligious, intercultural and intercivilizational issues and concerns, including the opportunity and mechanism for religious leaders to speak, interact and respond more clearly and quickly in times of violence, crises and conflict;
- An invitation to the Secretary-General to explore enhancing implementation mechanisms and to follow up on the Declaration and Programme of Action on a Culture of Peace and the Global Agenda for Dialogue Among Civilizations of 2001 adopted by the General Assembly and other initiatives on dialogue among cultures and civilizations.

Since then (2005) the Tripartite Forum on Interfaith Cooperation for Peace and the Alliance of Civilizations have been launched, both building on years of preparatory work and their own distinct origins.

UN agencies have continued to engage with intercultural and interreligious issues, for example UNESCO in its intercultural and interreligious programmes, UNFPA in seeking culturally sensitive approaches and UNICEF in working together with religious communities on a wide range of programmes for children.

The initiatives and organizations mentioned here in the concept note, as well as other like minded organizations working locally, regionally and globally, continue in their efforts to implement their respective strategies and recommendations. Participants in this Interactive Hearing are encouraged to bring in their expertise, ideas and best practices to advance interreligious and intercultural understanding and cooperation everywhere in the world and to strengthen the outreach to support this cause.

Further and more detailed information on selected major conferences, initiatives and reference documents can be found on the web site of the High-level Dialogue on Interreligious and Intercultural Understanding and Cooperation for Peace:

<http://www.un.org/ga/president/61/follow-up/hld-interreligious.shtml>

**Tentative Programme for the High-level Dialogue on Interreligious  
and Intercultural Understanding and Cooperation for Peace  
4-5 October 2007**

**Thursday 4 October**

- 10.00 – 13.00 hrs - Opening of **the High-level Dialogue** by H.E. Dr. Srgjan Kerim, President of the 62<sup>nd</sup> Session of the General Assembly (Plenary meeting, General Assembly Hall), on the theme *“Interreligious and intercultural cooperation for the promotion of tolerance, understanding and universal respect on matters of freedom of religious or belief and cultural diversity”*
- Statements by Member States and Observers to the United Nations  
(Statement should not be more than 7 minutes)
- 15.00 – 18.00 hrs. - **Hearing with Civil Society, including NGOs and the private sector** (Trusteeship Council Chamber)
- Opening of the Hearing with Civil Society by the President of the 62<sup>nd</sup> session of the General Assembly, followed by two panel discussions
- Remarks by Mr. Jorge Sampaio, High Representative of the Secretary-General for the Alliance of Civilizations
- **Panel 1: Challenges of Interreligious and Intercultural Cooperation Today**
- Floor will be open for interaction with Member States after the panel’s presentations
- **Panel 2: Best Practices and Strategies of Interreligious and Intercultural Cooperation Going Forward**
- Floor will be open for interaction with Member States after the panel’s presentations

**Friday 5 October 2007**

- 10.00 – 13.00 hrs - **Continuation of the High-level Dialogue**  
15.00 – 18.00 hrs (Plenary meetings, General Assembly Hall)
- Closing remarks by the President of the 62<sup>nd</sup> session of the General Assembly
- High-level Dialogue concludes

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**List of speakers, respondents, invited guests and moderators at  
The Informal Interactive Hearing of the General Assembly on Interreligious  
and Intercultural Understanding and Cooperation for Peace  
Thursday 4 October 2007, 15.00 -18.00 hrs**

**Panel 1: Challenges of Interreligious and Intercultural Cooperation Today**

*Speakers:*

- **Ms. Gulvaira Shermatova**, Director, L'auravetli'an Information & Education, Network of Indigenous Peoples, Russia
- **Prof. Paul Knitter**, Paul Tillich Professor of Theology, World Religions and Culture, Union Theological Seminary, USA
- **Prof. Gamal I. Serour**, Director, International Islamic Center for Population Studies and Research, Al Azhar Centre, Egypt
- **Dr. Sohan Lal Gandhi**, President, Anuvrat Global Organization, India
- **Mr. Muhammad Nurayn Ashafa**, Joint Executive Director, Interfaith Mediation Centre, Nigeria

*Respondents:*

- **Mr. Manuel Manonelles**, Director, Foundation for a Culture of Peace, Spain
- **Mr. Thalif Deen**, UN Bureau Chief, Inter Press Service International Association, Sri Lanka
- **Prof. Eliseo Mercado**, Chair, National Peace Council, Philippines
- **Rev. Judith Van Osdol**, Continental Coordinator of Women's Ministries, Latin American Council of Churches, Argentina
- **Ms. Katy Sarre**, Chief Executive Officer, INFOGEST, Senegal

*Moderator*

- **Dr. William Vendley**, Secretary-General, World Conference of Religions for Peace, USA

**Panel 2:**

**Best Practices and Strategies of Interreligious and Intercultural Cooperation Going Forward**

*Speakers:*

- **Sr. Gerardette Philips**, Representative, Islamic College for Advanced Studies/Religious of the Sacred Heart
- **Ms. Georgette Bennett**, President and Founder, Tanenbaum Center for Interreligious Understanding, USA
- **Rev. Carlos Tamez**, Representative, Comunidad Teologica de Honduras, Honduras
- **Ms. Mitra Deliri**, Representative of the Bahá'í International Community and Director of External Affairs Office of the Bahá'ís of Tanzania, Tanzania
- **Mr. Effenus Henderson**, Chief Diversity Officer, Weyerhaeuser Company, USA

***Respondents:***

- **Prof. Steven Rockefeller**, Co-chair, Earth Charter International, USA
- **Sr. Francisca Ngozi Uti**, Representative, Centre for Women Studies and Intervention, Nigeria
- **Dr. Josef Boehle**, Coordinator, UNESCO Chair in Interfaith Studies, University of Birmingham, UK
- **Mr. Tatsuya Yoshioka**, Director, Peace Boat, Japan
- **Ms. Fatima Ahmed**, Executive Director, Zenab for Women in Development, Sudan

***Moderator:***

- **H.E. Mr. Abdullah Ahmed Mohamed Al-Murad**, Ambassador and Permanent Representative of Kuwait to the United Nations

**Invited Guests:**

- **Mr. Qamar-ul- Huda**, Scholar of Islamic Studies and Comparative Religions, Pakistan.
- **Dr. John Taylor**, Representative, International Association for Religious Freedom, Switzerland

**Civil Society Task Force members:**

Members of the Civil Society Task Force, whose names appear below, may also be called upon to engage in the hearing, as necessary.

- **Mr. Ari Alexander**, Co-Executive Director, Children of Abraham, USA
- **Dr. Kezevino Aram**, Director, Shanti Ashram, India
- **Mr. Erol Avdovic**, UN Correspondent, Deutsche Welle, Bosnia and Herzegovina
- **Mr. Hiro Sakurai**, UN Representative, Soka Gakkai International, and Former President, Committee of Religious NGOs, Japan

**Note:** Speakers and respondents have been requested to participate at the Informal Interactive Hearing in their individual capacity.