

Plan of Action for religious leaders/actors from the Asia-Pacific region to prevent incitement to violence that could lead to atrocity crimes

INTRODUCTION

Atrocity crimes are usually preceded by incitement to violence that originates in the form of “hate speech” that targets particular communities, based on their identity. Incitement can both be a warning sign and a trigger for atrocity crimes. Finding the means to diffuse hate speech, or preventing it from reaching its target audience and presenting alternative messages may help in preventing and curbing the violence that can lead to atrocity crimes.

With this objective in mind, the United Nations Office on Genocide Prevention and the Responsibility to Protect, in conjunction with International Dialogue Center (KAICIID) and the World Council of Churches (WCC), held a meeting on 6-7 December 2016 in Bangkok, Thailand, on "The Role of Religious Leaders from the Asia-Pacific region in Preventing Incitement that could lead to Atrocity Crimes." The meeting brought together some thirty religious leaders and actors representing different religions and faith traditions, as well as representatives of faith based organizations from various countries from the Asia-Pacific region, including from India, Indonesia, Myanmar, Mongolia, Nepal, New Zealand, Pakistan and Sri Lanka, to develop a regional strategy to prevent incitement, working individually and collectively.

The Bangkok meeting was the fifth and last in a series of regional meetings convened by the United Nations Office on Genocide Prevention and the Responsibility to Protect as follow-up to a meeting of religious leaders from around the world that was held on 24 April 2015 in Fez, Morocco. The outcome of this meeting was a Plan of Action for the prevention of incitement and the Fez Declaration, a declaration of principles. At the regional meetings, the input of religious leaders from across all regions has been sought on the Fez Plan of Action and religious leaders have developed context-specific strategies for implementing the Fez Plan of Action.

The consultations that took place in Bangkok clearly showed that a number of factors contribute to the spread of hate speech and incitement to violence in the Asia-Pacific region, including lack of knowledge and understanding of different religions, patterns of discrimination, and unresolved historic and current grievances. It was also clear from the discussions how much religious leaders and actors in the region are already doing to prevent hostility and hate speech and promote inter-faith cooperation.

Participants were encouraged to work individually and together to implement the recommendations in this document at the community, national, regional and global levels, and to integrate these recommendations in the context of existing activities, as well as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendations for religious leaders and actors

Support for peace, security and human rights

- Religious leaders should increase their knowledge and understanding of international humanitarian law and human rights standards;
- They should support the right of all peoples to freedom of religion and belief, as well as freedom of expression and opinion and peaceful assembly. They should strengthen ecumenical networks to promote these rights and should resist laws, practices, customs and traditions that restrict or threaten them;
- Religious leaders and actors should help fight all forms of discrimination, including discrimination based on class, cast, race, ethnicity or religion, such as antisemitism, Islamophobia and xenophobia. They can monitor and report on national, regional and global trends and support initiatives aimed at countering discrimination;
- Policies and programmes aimed at proselytization or the conversion or of those practicing different faiths or religions should be reviewed. While the right of an individual to convert to a different faith or religion if they so choose is to be protected, so is the right of each individual to practice their own religion. Religious leaders and actors should create awareness about, defend and support the right to nationality as a fundamental human right and advocate with national authorities for this right to be included in national constitutions;
- Religious leaders and actors can support UNHCR’ “I-belong” campaign¹ which aims to raise awareness about and combat the problem of childhood statelessness, and to promote the right of every child to acquire a nationality;
- There is a pressing need for religious leaders and actors to enhance their contribution to changing discriminatory social norms and ideas, including those relating to gender;
- Religious leaders can create pathways or space to counter exclusion and discrimination of women and youth and include their voices in faith leadership;
- Religious leaders and actors could engage in peaceful protests, rallies and demonstrations to expose, challenge, and eradicate discrimination, bigotry, intolerance and violence;
- Religious leaders and actors should strive to dismantle walls and build bridges between communities;
- Further effort needs to be invested in fostering values and principles that support the just and peaceful coexistence of all peoples; engaging with communities to address long standing grievances, intolerance and scapegoating; recognizing the rights of “forgotten minorities”; and raise their issues/rights with national authorities;
- More religious leaders and actors should contribute to mediation, conflict prevention and conflict transformation processes. They should act early to address tensions, before discrimination and violence are normalized and institutionalized, and take steps to remedy any measure that could lead to discrimination and exclusion;
- Religious leaders have a significant role to play in combating manipulation of religions at the national, regional and global level;
- Religious leaders and actors should avoid becoming involved in party politics;

¹ <http://www.unhcr.org/ibelong/>

- However, religious leaders and actors have a particular role to play in exposing corruption and bad governance and holding politicians and world leaders accountable. This constant engagement is essential.

Inter-religious collaboration on religious and non-religious issues

- Interfaith and intra-faith dialogues should include all faiths, religions and beliefs, including those who subscribe to secular ideologies;
- In the context of interreligious dialogue initiatives, religious leaders and actors should engage in persistent and ongoing dialogue with religious groups, including with those that hold extremist views;
- Religious leaders and actors should organize national and regional exchanges of experiences and good practices, including in relation to justice and reconciliation processes;
- Religious leaders and actors should support the initiatives of other religious leaders and actors who speak out in support of human rights and justice, and of oppressed communities, in particular;
- Religious leaders from different faiths and religions should invite each other to address each other's faith communities in their respective places of worship;
- Religious leaders and actors belonging to different faiths and beliefs can come together on common human issues that transcend religion, such as economic and social justice, nuclear disarmament, and accessibility to education, health, water and sanitation. This can raise the quality of life of more humans and convey powerful messages of interreligious collaboration and solidarity, especially in contexts where religious tensions are high.

Preventing and curbing hate speech and incitement to violence

- Religious leaders and actors should find ways to counter hate speech and incitement to violence by all actors, whether within and outside the country,
- They can be more preventive than responsive in their approach and disseminate positive and affirmative speech to counteract hate and incitement speech;
- Religious leaders and actors should engage with all communities and audiences, including those who are hostile or whose ideologies are discriminatory or extremist;
- Religious leaders and actors should review social stigmas and stereotypes associated with their own and other religions. They should speak on behalf of the rights of the other religions when threatened or violated and also listen to and learn from different world views, opinions and perspectives;
- Religious leaders and actors should acknowledge and contribute to transforming negative stereotypes of women and sexual minorities. This will in itself reduce incitement to violence and discrimination;
- Religious proclamations legitimize attitudes and behaviors. They should be used to reinforce positive values and human rights and prevent bigotry, intolerance and violence;
- Religious leaders and actors can monitor constitutions, laws and legal reforms for discriminatory content and advocate for its removal;
- They should also monitor the media, including social media, to ensure that hate and incitement speech is constantly identified and countered;

- Religious leaders and actors should be trained in the use of social media to effectively contribute to the inclusion of constructive messages in public discourse.

Engaging communities, including youth

- Building links with youth groups is essential to build trust with this important sector of the population. Therefore, religious leaders and actors should engage more with youth in general, including through sports and cultural activities, as well as through social media, universities and civic institutions. As open learning spaces, the latter contexts can play a central role in fostering interreligious understanding and dialogue and in building bridges among different cultures and religions;
- Religious leaders, academics and social workers can challenge national authorities to tackle deep seated animosity and grievances in their communities;
- They should also consider the important roles that both women and men can play in propagating or fighting prejudice and violence;
- Creative initiatives that promote justice, peace, unity, mutual respect and harmony, such as the “Walk of Hope”², should be supported.

Strengthening collaboration with traditional and new media

- Religious leaders and actors should monitor the output of traditional and new media and encourage them to respect and apply ethical standards of journalism. The media should be challenged to act as agents of change for the common good;
- Religious leaders and actors should work actively with traditional and new media organisations to counter prejudices and rumors;
- Popular social media organisations, including Facebook, should be made active partners in advocacy to support counter speech and alternative narrative campaigns;
- These organisations could also help develop an online platform of moderate religious leaders (“cyber force”) who could help to combat incitement to discrimination, hostility and violence;
- Religious leaders and actors should be trained in the use of social media so that they can counter and respond to online hate speech and incitement;
- There is a need for both offline and online campaigns on the prevention of violent extremism.

Strengthening religious and secular education

- Religious leaders and actors should address a lack of religious literacy by giving their followers information about different religions and cultures;
- Religious leaders and actors should be provided with opportunities to strengthen their expertise, including on interfaith knowledge and dialogue, the use of social media and youth engagement;
- Religious leaders and actors should promote the development of an interfaith curriculum in schools. Schools curricula should include education on all religions and not only on the religion associated with the State.
- Religious educational institutions should include teaching about different religions and beliefs, as well as critical thinking. If possible, they should invite a scholar or

² <http://walkofhope.in/>

practitioner of the faith in focus to visit their classrooms and hold discussions with students;

- Academic institutions should be encouraged to monitor and assess hate speech, its origins and causes, and offer suggestions for ways to prevent and counter hate speech;
- Policy makers, political leaders and civil servants should be provided with education on the teachings of the different religions and on current religious issues.

Recommendations for other actors

Recommendations for States

- States should adopt, ratify and respect international humanitarian law and human rights standards, including those pertaining to religious, ethnic and linguistic minorities. The United Nations organs and entities should hold all Member States equally accountable in this regard;
- The right to a nationality, and to not be arbitrarily deprived of one's nationality, is a universal and fundamental human right. States should respect this right and take steps to prevent statelessness. The United Nations "decade on statelessness" should be supported by all religions;
- Governments should guarantee freedom of religion and belief, and therefore ensure full respect for article 18 of the International Covenant for Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). They should be held responsible for failing to do so;
- States should also adopt policies in favour of religious freedom and religious diversity, in line with international human rights law, based on New Zealand's model³;
- States should support and provide protection to those religious leaders and actors who exercise freedom of expression in order to raise concerns at negative aspects of institutionalized religion and advocate for inter religious trust and freedom of religion and belief for the common good;
- States should ensure that both civilian and uniformed Government personnel have basic knowledge of all religions, and are trained to rise above prejudice and discrimination and engage with sensitivity with religious communities, especially when they see instances of hate speech and incitement;

³ New Zealand's model is a work in progress and is relevant specifically in a context of diversity, rather than a polarized or bi-cultural context. New Zealand's Statement on Religious Diversity provides a basis for ongoing discussion of religious diversity in this country. It sets out a number of principles which are grounded in international human rights treaties and the New Zealand Bill of Rights Act, including:

- freedom of religion, conscience, and belief,
- freedom of expression,
- the right to safety and security,
- The right to reasonable accommodation of diverse religious practices in various settings.

The statement also emphasises that the State seeks to treat all faith communities and those who profess no religion equally before the law, and that New Zealand has no official or established religion. It encourages education about diverse religious and spiritual traditions, respectful dialogue, and positive relationships between government and faith communities. It offers a framework within which religious issues can be discussed both by faith communities themselves and within the wider New Zealand community. <https://www.hrc.co.nz/your-rights/race-relations-and-diversity/religion/our-work/>

- States within the Asia-Pacific region could share good practices on engagement with religious groups and learn from each other's best practices;
- States should ensure that religious institutions are governed by the same principles of transparency and accountability as other institutions;
- Failure to adequately address the unjust legacies of history, including colonization and past instances of atrocity crimes, increases the risk of atrocity crimes. The United Nations and respective governments should address these traumas through appropriate transitional justice processes so that there will be truth telling, justice and reconciliation, which alone can prevent the recurrence of unrest and violence.

Recommendations to media

- Social media organisations should apply ethical standards so as to prevent hate speech and incitement to violence, without undermining freedom of expression and opinion, and with full respect for articles 19 and 20 of the ICCPR;
- Journalists should be trained on and abide by ethical journalism principles, and acknowledge their social responsibility;
- There should be better collaboration between religious leaders and actors and new and traditional media. During times of crisis, the media can support the work of religious leaders and actors to defuse tensions. When the media is under threat, religious leaders can and should speak up on their behalf;
- Religious leaders can advocate for traditional and new media to ensure balanced and objective reporting and take into consideration the consequences of the way they report religious tensions and violence, particularly in a polarized environment, in order to avoid the risk of exacerbating tensions and increasing the risk of further violence.
- By contrast, religious leaders can encourage the media to publicise positive stories of religious and secular actors who have countered extremist narratives, as well as news and information about initiatives aimed at enhancing reciprocal respect and peaceful coexistence.

Recommendations for the United Nations

- The United Nations could establish a world forum of religions and beliefs. The forum could be convened by the United Nations to bring together an equal representation of religious leaders, policy makers, educators and media personnel from all regions and religions, who will deliberate on the role of religions in enhancing a safe, just and reconciled world;
- Similar forums should be set up regionally. These regional forums could take place before the meeting of the world forum and could inform the agenda of the world forum.

Recommendations for the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN)

- Acknowledging the efforts that ASEAN and the South-Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) countries have made to promote religious tolerance, these organisations could take steps to actively promote “unity in diversity”, in line with the reality of the Asian region.