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“Forging Interfaith Intercultural Alliances: Coordinated Action for Peacebuilding and Human Rights”

When the nine religious leaders, played by youth delegates representing their faiths, speaking in one voice, reported the results of their fact-finding missions to the Middle East and South Asia on “Prevention, Mediation and Peacebuilding” to the “United Nations Interreligious Council”, the full room of more than 250 government and United Nations representatives, religious leaders, experts and civil society leaders listened intently. “This is what should be happening at the Durban Review,” expressed one Ambassador referring to the upcoming review of the 2001 UN Conference against Racism that will be held at the UN in Geneva this month in an effort to salvage the difficult negotiations and unwillingness to compromise that tarnished its beginnings. Echoed again in the closing speech of Hon. **Remy Pagani**, mayor elect of the city of Geneva, when he encouraged the participants and youth especially to continue their course as he noted that Geneva itself which now stands as a haven for peace and intercultural harmony had a painful history of religious war and intolerance that had to be won.



Report by. Carolyn Handschin, co-founder GIIA

The conference, coinciding with the UPF world peace tour, and co-sponsored by the Mission of Indonesia, the Geneva Interfaith and Intercultural Alliance, the Universal Peace Federation and Women's Federation for World Peace International was held at the United Nations in Geneva on April 3, 2009. There was a striking combination of youth and elders, religion and government- that harmonized remarkably well. The Opening Session, "Forging a Global Leadership Alliance Committed to Ethics and Action" was chaired by **Heiner Handschin**, Secretary General of UPF in Europe Region 2 and GIA Vice president. Speakers included Mr. **Werner Schlieffer** , Senior Executive Coordinator of the Conference of NGO's (CONGO), **Ambassador Makarim Wibisono**, the Conference Chair, former President of the Human Rights Council and currently President of GIA . Also on the panel were Dr. **Chung Hwan Kwak**, Chairman UPF International, **Hon. Anton Rop**, former President of Slovenia, **Hon. Pieter Beelaerts van Blockland**, former Minister of Housing of the Netherlands and **Amb. Laura Thompson Chacon** of Costa Rica.



Session Two, “Towards an Interreligious Council: Accelerating the Process” was facilitated by Mr. **Mark Brann**, Secretary General of UPF in Europe Region 1 and included very prominent voices from the Geneva Interfaith community: **Rev. Dr. William McComish**, Dean Emeritus of the Geneva Cathedral; **Chief Rabbi Itzhak Dayan** of the Israelite Community in Geneva; **Dr. Hafid Ouardiri**, spokesman for the Moslem community in Geneva for 28 years and **Dr. Arun Pabari**, Coordinator for the World Sathya Sai in Geneva. Each brought his strong message, based upon personal experiences ,that there is no going back to narrow and exclusive paths. Each expressed, as well, their appreciation of being invited into this initiative that calls for religion to strengthen, the United Nations, as well as the aspect of leadership training for their youth that carries such a serious and hopeful mandate. Other speakers included the Ambassador of Senegal, **Babacar Carlos Mbaye** and The Ambassador of Kenya, HE. **Richard Owade**, who delivered a message from Mme **Ida Betty Odinga** , President of the League of Women Voters in Kenya and wife of the Prime Minister, who was scheduled, yet finally unable- to attend. The sessions’ final speakers, Min. **Jesus Domingo** of the Philippines Mission to the UN and Dr. **Thomas Walsh**, Secretary General of UPF International both presented very practical outlines of the work done in the UN, as well as research into the needs for and practical functioning of the proposed UN Interreligious Council.



The third session, “The Interreligious Youth Council: Special Session on Prevention, Mediation and Pecebuilding” was chaired by **Carolyn Handschin**, Deputy director of the Women’s Federation for World Peace, International and GIAA Coordinator for the youth. Minister Jesus Domingo served as acting President in the absence of the President Ambassador Wibisono. It was the fifth such event in five months whereby the proposed High level United Nations Interreligious Council in formal sessions was demonstrated through the youth – as representatives of their religions. In most cases, these youth, aged between 18-24 were selected by the religious leaders themselves to play the role of delegates to this hypothetical council.



Taking on its first substantive “mission”, this session of the “UN Interreligious Council” was receiving reports of “task forces” that had been mandated in the session in September. These groups were comprised of representatives of religions who are currently present in South Asia and the Middle East to go on hypothetical “fact-finding missions” and then report back to the Council about the evidences of religion and interreligious cooperation or lack of it -in the three areas of prevention, mediation and peacebuilding. A “Resolution on Peacebuilding and Human Rights” was adopted by consensus in which all IRC delegates pledged to, “ To recognize and reinforce the sacred value in each other’s beliefs and traditions and to work together, focusing on our common beliefs and values for our common goal of universal peace.”



In Geneva in September 2008, a simulation of a hypothetical “United Nations Interreligious Council” was inaugurated with delegates from Buddhist, Christian, Hindu, Islam, Jewish, Sikh, and Unificationist faiths in order to demonstrate the important role that religion and cultural diversity could play in solving problematic issues of global concern, in general- and specifically, if given a platform within the United Nations. Similar Youth Councils were since inaugurated in London, Bergamo, Vienna and New York with the long term mandate to assist local governments and institutions in reconciling – or better, preventing- the misunderstanding that leads to enmity by drawing on the best that religion has to contribute to peace. An “Interfaith Declaration on Peace and Human Rights” was drafted and serves as founding document. Other regional councils have likewise adopted declarations and report annually to the Geneva Interreligious Council.

The final closing session was conducted by Chair **Ambassador Makarim Wibisono**, who formally adopted the reports and resolution. Adding to his own remarks of appreciation and encouragement for the youth and the initiative was the message of the **Mayor elect, Honorable Remy Pagani** of the city of Geneva.

