

Swami Agnivesh Joins Religious Leaders “United in Action against Violence in the Name of Religion”

VIENNA, 19 NOVEMBER 2014

Buddhist, Christian, Druze, Hindu, Jewish, Mandeian, Sunni, Shiite, and Yezidi religious leaders from Iraq, Syria, the Middle East, Asia, and Europe gathered in Vienna in an unprecedented demonstration of multi-religious solidarity. Together they denounced with one voice all violence in the name of religion, and called on the international community to protect religious and cultural diversity in Iraq and Syria.



On behalf of their communities they jointly issued on 19 November the [Vienna Declaration, “United against Violence in the Name of Religion”](#), at the international conference organized by the KAICIID Dialogue Centre.

This is the first time religious leaders representing so many different religions from a crisis region, came together as one to denounce oppression, marginalization, persecution and killing of people in the name of religion.

Swami Agnivesh, a member of the KAICIID Board of Directors, was moved by the depth of solidarity among this diverse group of religious leaders, and addressed the gathering.

“Today I really feel very proud. This is the first time that we came together, and there was such intense, such profound sharing. I could hear the pain and the anguish in all your deliberations and your speeches. You are such great people. You have come from the areas of conflict, from among the people themselves, and you have shared your wisdom. We should feel challenged to bring about a change, a new understanding of religion itself. We have spoken about humanity, and the whole of humanity is one family.”



In a plea on behalf of all of the religious leaders, the group affirmed that in the shadow of these difficult circumstances, the atrocities and deprivations suffered by the persecuted religious communities in Iraq and Syria, the leaders pledged to remain sincere in their convictions, true to their religious teachings and mindful of their humanitarian values.

The religious leaders acknowledged in unity that the current conflict in Iraq and Syria targets followers of every religion. They jointly rejected all violence in the name of religion, and attempts by groups like ISIS to claim legitimacy for their actions within the teachings of Islam. They also condemned the serious violation of human rights in Iraq and Syria; especially against Christian, Yazidi and other religious and ethnic groups.

In a statement of solidarity, the conference participants declared that “we gather together to listen to each other, and to think together about possibilities for cooperation to transform the crisis. It is through dialogue and the strengthening of our mutual values of citizenship, that the windows of hope and aspiration will be opened. We must tear down the barriers of fear, holding grudges and injustice, which divide people and eliminate their dreams and hopes of peace.”



After two days of consultation with religious leaders, Swami Agnivesh urged the gathering in his closing statement to take immediate action, and called on religious leaders to go together to the scene of the crisis and make a united stand against the violence.

“We should feel challenged and we should say it loud and clear, so that the world knows we mean business. We mean change. Let us spare the time, and express real solidarity with the victims to save as many lives as possible. There is still time but time is running out.”

Swami Agnivesh also recalled that the Metropolitans of Aleppo, the Syriac-Orthodox Archbishop Mar Gregorios Yohanna Ibrahim and the Greek-Orthodox Archbishop Boulos Yazigi, joined religious leaders at KAICIID’s November 2012 inauguration and were kidnapped just a few months later in April 2013. “My heart is going out to them. I feel one with them. Today we don’t know where they are. So I feel for those two

bishops, and I feel for every one of those who are now being victimized. So let us do something, not just words, some action”.

In their joint declaration, the religious leaders emphasized the right of all to be treated with dignity and humanity regardless of their religious tradition. Atrocities committed in the name of religion are crimes against humanity, and crimes against religion. The declaration also rejects and denounces the support or sponsorship of terrorism.

Together the religious leaders expressed their collective solidarity with all who are oppressed due to these events, especially those who have been uprooted and displaced from their homes. They called upon relevant political powers and the international community to spare no effort to help these people return to their homes.

Speaking after the meeting, Faisal Bin Muaammar, KAICIID Secretary General, the international organizer of the conference said, “The manipulation of religion in Iraq and Syria has horrific human consequences. Today we witnessed a reason for hope: the conviction and resolve of religious leaders from many different faiths, speaking with one voice, to say that ISIS and other extremist groups do not act in the name of religion”.

“The KAICIID Dialogue Centre is privileged to have brought these religious leaders together, and is committed to work with them, and with our partners in the international community, to help build peace for the people who suffer in this crisis, and to ensure that the world hears this call for action.”

The participants at the KAICIID Conference “United against Violence in the Name of Religion” also recommended initiatives to promote social

cohesion and peacebuilding in the region. The recommendations included the following seven activities:

1. Collect, study, acknowledge and promote success stories of interreligious and peace initiatives.
2. Introduce IRD education and training to students of religions including developing interreligious dialogue curricula.
3. Train preachers to disseminate the values of diversity and citizenship.
4. Establish a network of local religious leaders who believe in diversity and pluralism.
5. Provide a social media platform to increase important voices (for example [the 126 Muslim scholars who denounced ISIS in an open letter on 24 September 2014](#))
6. Provide a training for a large number of youth, and empower them on social media.
7. Form a regional follow up committee to enact the recommendations

ABOUT THE CONFERENCE

Many religious leaders took part in two days of intensive discussion and planning. Among the prominent attendees were the Grand Muftis of Egypt (Sheikh Shawqi Ibrahim Alam), Jordan (Sheikh Abdul al Karim Al Khasawneh) and Lebanon (Sheikh Abd Al Latif Derian); the Mufti of Tripoli and North Lebanon, Malek Al Shaar; Patriarch Gregory III Laham, Patriarch of Antioch and All the East and Alexandria and Jerusalem; Patriarch Ignatius Youssef Younan of Antioch and All the East for the Syriac Catholic Church; Patriarch Louis Raphael I Sako, the Chaldean Catholic Patriarch of Babylon and the Head of the Chaldean Catholic Church; Anba Marcos Bishop of Shobra El Khema, representative of His Holiness Pope Tawadoros II, Pope of the Alexandria and Patriarch of the See of St. Mark, Head of the Coptic Orthodox Church of Egypt; and Metropolitan of Germany Isaac Barakat, representing Patriarch Yohanna X (Yazigi) the Greek Orthodox Patriarch of Antioch and All the East.

Also present at the event were high level representatives from the Armenian Orthodox Church; the Council of Senior Scholars from Saudi Arabia; the Mouwahiddoun Druze Community in Lebanon; the Evangelical Community of Lebanon; the Iraqi Muslim Association; the Maronite Patriarchate of Antioch and all the East, Alexandria and Jerusalem; the Mandaean Community in Iraq; the Melkite Greek Catholic Church, the Middle East Council of Churches, the Protestant Community of Egypt, and among many others.

All nine members of the Board of Directors of KAICIID were present at the conference, including: Swami Agnivesh, Dr. Hamad Al-Majed,

Reverend Father Miguel Ayuso, His Eminence Metropolitan Emmanuel, Reverend Dr. Toby Howarth, Dr. Seyyed Ataollah Mohajerani, Rev. Kosho Niwano, Chief Rabbi David Rosen, and Dr. Mohammad Sammak.

Among the organizations represented at the International Conference were the Office of the UN's Special Adviser on the Prevention of Genocide, UNDP Iraq, UNDPA, the European Commission, the Adyan Foundation, the al-Khoei Foundation, the Arab Group for Muslim-Christian Dialogue, the Forum for Promoting Peace in Muslim Societies, the Iraqi Institute for Human Rights, the Iraqi Interfaith Council, and the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue.

ABOUT KAICIID

The KAICIID Dialogue Centre (King Abdullah Bin Abdulaziz International Centre for Interreligious and Intercultural Dialogue) was founded to enable, empower and encourage dialogue among followers of different religions and cultures around the world. Located in Vienna, the Centre is an independent international organisation, free of political or economic influence.

The Founding States of the Centre (Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Republic of Austria and Kingdom of Spain) constitute the "Council of Parties" responsible for overseeing the work of the Centre; the Holy See is the Centre's Founding Observer. An overview of the Centre's areas of work is available [here](#).