

IARF e-Newsletter

May 2009

News in a nutshell...

To

IARF Council; Member organisations & Chapters;
Interested organisations.



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- Theme of 33rd IARF International Congress announced (see President's Message)

- Recent SACC events, India:
 - National Workshop on Religion, Human Rights and Peace
 - "Adivasi / Dalit" HRE program, May 9th and 10th
 - IARF Foundation Day, May 25th

- HRE Philippines Update

- Forthcoming Events

Message from the President

Peace Greetings.

Meeting with enthusiasm at Tsubaki Shrine in Japan (see the report on our homepage), IARF's International Council formed the 33rd Congress Working Party to plan for a successful Congress in India (Kochi, 4th – 7th September 2010), and took the decision to continue support for the second phase of the Human Rights Education (HRE) projects in India and Philippines, which has so far been a success. I have been lucky to attend some programs, understand the real pulse of different communities, and learn of the human right violations that are still taking place.



JLC delegation with SACC hosts in Kochi

All our HRE programmes are driven by the vision of bringing people together by settling their local disputes. And after the visit of the JLC delegation to the venue in Kochi, we are set to make every effort toward conducting a successful 33rd IARF Congress, with a full-fledged office for this purpose to commence soon - probably August 2009. I am delighted to announce that the Congress theme has been decided: **"The Healing Touch of Reconciliation"**. A full announcement is to be made at the end of June.

SACC has decided to conduct a three-day International Youth meet September 9th to 11th 2009 in Chennai. Some participants will be foreign students studying in India. We are also looking forward to the success of the Europe & Middle East conference in October in Germany, and the North American regional conference at Clearwater, Florida, USA in January 2010.



At the Council meeting, Tsubaki Grand Shrine, in March:
Thomas Mathew (right) meets Most Rev Mitsuo Miyake
of the Konko Church of Izu, host of the Osaka
secretariat

The cardinal principles of a modern society are: right to life; pluralism; dignified interactions; and religious equality. But even our democratic systems are exhibiting decline with regard to rates of poverty, illiteracy, discrimination and intolerance. Civilized society cannot divide its people with a poverty datum line. Citizens from all walks of life should grow and understand each other, as freedom and equality are incomplete without peace. Determined effort is needed toward comprehensive reforms that will allow a just and humane global society to develop.

We believe that only the full integration of humankind irrespective of race, religion and caste can rid us of the discord that is engulfing our common universe. Local peace initiatives must be strengthened in order to avoid divisions and parochial patriotisms. Our dream must be a collective shift in social consciousness. For that, team-building is essential, and IARF must be a high-performing team. We have to build an economic, physical and attitudinal base with the co-operation of all member groups, members and like-minded NGOs.

The year 2010 will hopefully shed some light in the prevailing gloom. For us, our Congress should be the commencement of a great task of restructuring for meaningful peace-building. Our desires and dreams will have to propose and anchor for that proximity-building, and obviously 2010-20 will be our dream decade.

I appreciate all the member groups and Chapters giving unconditional support to the activities of IARF.

Regards to all,
Thomas Mathew, President

SACC Events

National Workshop on Religion, Human Rights and Peace

15 April 2009

Government Arts College, Paramakudi, TamilNadu, India.

Jointly organized by:

- South Asian Coordination Council (SACC) of IARF
- Amnesty Panchayats of Government Arts College
- Alagappa University Evening College
- Guru Rural Empowerment & Action Trust (GREAT), Paramakudi.

Bomb Threat

As preparations were going ahead for this workshop, the Principal of Paramakudi Govt. Arts College received an anonymous letter informing that between 10th and 20th April, a bomb would be planted in the college, and cautioning the authorities to ensure the safety of students.

Police and revenue authorities took charge of the campus, and when they came to know that a national level workshop was to be held, they became concerned and investigated any possible threat from terrorist groups.

The area is 75km from Madurai City, close to the Arabian Sea and a centre for Tamil refugees from the Sri Lankan civil war. And Dalit (lower caste) / Thevar (upper caste) community clashes are very common here. So preparations for IARF's Human Rights Seminar had been closely watched by both Government and various religious communities.

Only after assurances from the Workshop Director and Principal-in-Charge Dr. G. Rajaram, were police authorities convinced, and preparations for the workshop allowed to proceed. Nonetheless full police protection was provided for the entire programme, in which about 100 people participated, comprising faculty, students, consumer and human rights activists, and the public.



The Workshop

Inter-religious prayer by Hindus, Muslims and Christians opened proceedings, and Dr. G.Rajaram welcomed the gathering, explained the workshop's purpose, and thanked SACC for the opportunity to organize it in Paramakudi. College Principal Prof. S. Banumathi emphasized the need for such workshops, and appreciated the organizers. IARF President Dr. Thomas Mathew inaugurated by narrating the various SACC activities; he requested that activities be strengthened at district level, by youth - especially students - conducting peace marches and inter-religious activities. Chief Guest Mr. Ravichandra Ramavanni, President, District Panchayath, emphasizing the need for religious harmony and peaceful coexistence, pointed out that the district had experienced conflict in the past based on religion and caste. So this venture was a wonderful opportunity to work toward harmony.



National President of IARF Mr. Rengapashyam stated that people should become involved in humanitarian activities, such as blood donation, to improve religious harmony. Mr. Shabeer Ahmed, National Secretary of IARF, gave many examples of discrimination based on caste, and emphasized the need for religious tolerance and appreciation of other religions' rituals. He explained the Indian HRE program of IARF, and the UDHR.

The first business session was facilitated by Prof K.Mayilvel, in which the causes for religious conflicts were identified. In his opening remarks he traced out some causes for disharmony from history and literature, and helped the participants come out with their ideas.

Open discussion started with Mrs. Packialakshmi, General Secretary of the Federation of Consumer Rights Organizations of Tamilnadu & Pondicherry, explaining how her mother-in-law, due to her orthodox beliefs, was reluctant to accommodate people of other religions in their house. Through various approaches her attitudes were changed, so that later she was very cordial with them, and visited their home for their religious functions.

A student participant, Ms. Durgalakshmi, shared her experience of having some Europeans visit her home while she was weaving a sari; they were attracted by the design and wanted the piece she was weaving. As she was cutting it from the loom, she cut her finger, so one of the women visitors removed her handkerchief and made a bandage. She still keeps the handkerchief as a token of love and mutual help, though her mother, an orthodox

Hindu, often urges her to throw it away, as it once belonged to someone of another religion. Her point was that these types of orthodox feeling may be among root causes of religious conflicts.

Mr. Gopalakrishnan, Secretary of Tamilnadu Progressive Writers Association, was of the opinion that **some religious fanatics and political leaders** are the main cause for spreading the message of religious disharmony, so youth must be very careful.

In the second business session, Dr. Madhava Soma Sundaram (*below*), Head of the Dept. of Criminology and Criminal Justice from Manonmaniam Sundaranar University, explained **the spirit of humanism** and facilitated the participants coming out with suggestions for mutual appreciation between religions and peaceful co-existence. All participants came out with lots of practical solutions.



Dr. Kayarkanni, Dept. of Economics Sri Parasakthi College for Women, emphasized the need for **participation in inter-religious functions**, so that understanding about other religions can take place. Mr. Veerachamy, a Consumer Activist from Dindugal, pressed for the need for constitutional amendments to remove religious disparity.

Mr. Ayyapan, a social worker who is preparing to start a new IARF Branch in Paramakudi, has pointed out that **blood donation** is a medium through which religious harmony could be achieved. He assured that, next IARF Foundation Day (May 25th 2010), he will organize a blood donation camp to highlight the importance IARF as a world interfaith organization.

Mr. Balamurugan, a student participant, stated that more **training in human rights** will help students understand humanism and remove religious disparity. Mr. Manickam, another student organizer, stated that sometimes government policies lead to religious conflicts.

Prof. Marudachalam, Dept. of Computer Science, came up with numerous practical solutions for countering religious disharmony. He suggested that more such workshops should be conducted across the country to help youth think and act. Mr. Ramachandran, HRE facilitator from Chennai, shared his



rich experience with the participants, and suggested that students should be proactive and willingly participate in such programmes. Dr. R. Pandi, Dept. of Commerce, Govt. Arts College Paramakudi, anchored the inaugural session and offered various suggestions. Prof. K. Kudalingam, Prof. S. Sriramulu and Prof. S. Suresh made extensive arrangements for the workshop and contributed to the success of the programme.

The workshop generally agreed that lack of information, illiteracy, poverty and the power games of politicians are the main causes that disturb religious harmony in India. All welcomed the role of the UN in monitoring the impacts of the UDHR in various countries.

Participants also agreed that constant vigilance and a message of love through actions, especially solidarity with the victims, are the main pillars of Peace.

A youth group was selected to convey those messages to the students in the University and Colleges. Finally, all participants took an Oath to work for religious harmony and Peace.



Along with the seminar a **Photo Exhibition** was arranged by the organizers which explicated lot of human rights violations and abuses around the world.

Report prepared by Dr.Rajaram, HRE Facilitator & Organizer and edited by T.K. Jyothiraj, HRE Administrator.

Over two days following the National Workshop (16th and 17th April), Dr.Rajaram in his capacity as HRE facilitator, conducted a Human Rights Education (HRE) programme for 40 student participants in Paramakudi.

“Adivasi / Dalit” HRE program

May 9 and 10

In May the second phase of the HRE program in Kerala began enthusiastically, with a new India Chapter branch opening after a program at the Adivasi & Dalit House Settlement Colony at Kurumthar in Pathanamthitta district.



The focus of the HRE team was on the discrimination taking place in that region against Dalits (the lowest Hindu caste) and Adivasis (the indigenous or ‘tribal’ people of India), who together comprise around 17% of Kerala’s population of 33 million*. They are mostly labourers, divided by sub-castes according to their work. Most hold a piece of government-donated land, usually valued around 4 cents (1 acre is worth 100 cents), but their access to education is very limited. Most live in small huts and struggle to earn their daily bread and send their children to school. They are still considered “untouchable”, and disallowed from entering upper-caste premises or some of

their worship places. Worse, they are also often effectively deprived of their right to worship, by frequent disputes with the upper caste over ownership of traditional places of worship.

Such a dispute led to an upper-caste attack on the Kurumthar adivasi community around twenty years back, over ownership of their worship place, the Kurumthar Kavu.

(The Tribal and Dalit places of worship in Kerala, known as *kavu*, are based on the presence of local deities related to the communities' day-to-day life, and ancestor spirits. Trees always surround the *kavu*, and no living thing on the premises may be killed. It is common to see many birds, insects and even snakes living peacefully alongside humans. Environmentalists now advocate the importance of the *kavu*, as it shelters many creatures and stores water for nature and people. Unfortunately many of them have been destroyed or abandoned due to social conflict or the greed for so-called development).



<< Mrs. Thanka, a victim of the attack, inaugurated the two-day HRE workshop by recalling its brutality, and how it took 14 years to get their land and *kavu* back from the upper caste through the judicial process.

During the interaction with the HRE team, participants voiced their grievances regarding their status as second-class citizens. One, Jincy Binu, said that even though they are invited to social gatherings such as weddings

and other ceremonial functions, they are not allowed to sit and dine with upper-caste people, but must wait to eat separately at the end. A social worker from the community related how she was ill-treated at an upper-caste wedding, and afterwards never attended any such events again.

Another participant, Chitra Podiayan, said that in order to avail themselves of their right of worship as Adi-Dravida worshippers ('nature worshippers'), the communities were forced to build their own places of worship. Also they felt that some in the upper-caste communities look down on their deities, and do not consider that they are real Hindu gods. Priyanka Prasad noted how a particular sect of local Christians considered all others to be sinners and devil-worshippers, refusing to mingle with others such that there is zero social interaction with them.

Another participant explained how some years ago, they were not allowed to take water from the upper caste-owned wells during summer. Recently this had changed, but still they cannot take water directly, instead it is brought and poured into their pots so that they do not touch the wells.



<<An educated girl who is the first-degree holder from the community said that the root cause of the degree of social discrimination in the region was the lack of education. She related how some 'forward caste' students coming to her for private coaching are even reluctant to drink a cup of water from her house.

Another participant shared that the young people - even children of higher-caste

communities - call Adivasi & Dalit elders by name, but expect their own elders to be addressed using respect titles by Adivasis & Dalits – failing which they would be physically attacked.



Participants related how dehumanized they felt, and how such behavior affronted their human dignity and challenged the secular constitution of India. They had never heard that the UN had such a valuable declaration as the UDHR, signed by all its membership. They enquired why it is not practiced, though agreed by all nations including India. The HRE facilitator informed them that the reason for organizing HRE programs is to educate the masses about these important UN declarations, and so help society to challenge discrimination based on religion and belief. Almost thirty participants attended the program, most of them women as men are the family breadwinners. Initially they were reluctant to respond when they found that one IARF facilitator was upper-caste, the other Christian, but when our aims and objectives were explained to them as encouraging them to feel as equal human beings, they commented how the program was an eye-opener to them, and asked for further such educative programs in their area.

The HRE team helped them chalk out an action plan to tackle discrimination. More social interaction, education and awareness programs among both tribal and upper-caste society are important for the attainment of mutual respect of one another's faith and human dignity.

The ladies cooked and served food for the participants, and finally all of them shared how they felt their struggle was recognized.

* According to the Indian Constitution all are Hindus except Muslims, Christians, Buddhists, Jains, Parsees, Bahais, Ahmadis and Sikhs. Dalits & Adivasis, officially known as "Schedule Castes" and "Schedule Tribes", often live together in one village, sometimes side by side. In Kerala they have the same class status, and at Kurumthar the communities live in the same "settlement colony", near the Adivasis' *kavu*. Dalits are the outcasts of Hindu religion, and Tribals, though nature-spirit worshippers and therefore not strictly Hindu, are now considered part of the Hindu community, though also outcast.

IARF Foundation Day, May 25th

The foundation of IARF in Massachusetts 110 years ago was celebrated in the following branches of the Indian national Chapter: Mysore; Indore; Tirunelveli; Chennai; Pondicherry; Nagercoil; Chinddwara; Kottayam; Pathamamthita; Mavelikara; Mysore; Thindavanum; Arokonam; Coimbatore; and Agartala.



At Tirunelveli:

Former Chapter president & current Patron of the India Chapter, Mr. M. Subramaniam, presided at the function, chief guest was commissioner of Tirunelveli Municipal Co-operation, Mr. T Mohan, and national chapter vice-president Mr. B.T Chidambaram explained briefly the history of IARF.



HRE Philippines

HRE training continues, and many beneficiaries - duck-owners - have already started selling. They have also improved their raising skills. During the last meeting it was seen that they have agreed upon better ways to make them more productive. They have decided to have an assessment every three months.

Right: HRE and the duck-raising project has been brought to the farmers in Calabnugan, Sibulan, Negros Oriental.



Left: Harvesting - After the training we helped harvest *tangkong* from the garden of Fernanda, one of the beneficiaries. *Tangkong* is also used for duck food. It grows in abundance by Ukoy River.

Right: Discussion before video showings has always been a very good time to get to know one another, as well as for orientation and answering clarifying questions.



Forthcoming <http://www.iarf.net/2008site/ForthcomingEvents/index.htm>

- **September 11th -13th 2009**
International Young Adult Program – Dhyana Ashram, Chennai, India
"The Role of Youth in Human Rights Duties"



IARF - SACC

This gathering concentrates on Indian HRE participants, facilitators and IARF young leaders. Also planned are invitations to international Master's students at universities in India. Any IARF young adults from abroad are welcome, their food and accommodation are covered.

- **October 22nd - 25th 2009**
Conference of IARF European & Middle Eastern Region and the European Liberal Protestants Network – Mannheim & Ludwigshafen (near Heidelberg), Germany
"Religious Freedom: A call to action"

The aim of this conference is to bring together all people from chapters and member groups who are willing to actively support and forward the aims of IARF. The programme will be specifically constructed to facilitate active membership; it is to consist of workshops, training sessions, business meetings and active discussions. The Religious Freedom Youth Network (RFYN) will have its meeting concurrently.

- **January 14th - 17th 2010**
IARF U. S. Chapter Conference – Clearwater, Florida, USA
"Reconciliation with the Earth, Each Other and the Stranger"
<http://home.iarfus.org/home/>