

International Association for Religious Freedom

REPORT

March to December 2008 of Representative at United Nations (Geneva)

March/April 2008:

I returned from the IARF Council Meeting at the Tsubaki Grand Shrine, Japan, and attended a special Interfaith Side Event at the UN Human Rights Council. NGOs, including IARF, had been consulted about criteria and names for the panellists from civil society and we were rather disappointed that the only names retained were of Christian and Muslim men; furthermore few of the presentations really took up issues of freedom of religion or belief as exposed by the Special Rapporteur, whose report was generally well received and whose mandate was renewed despite some unpleasant reactions from some states which she had criticized. States which were studied under the Universal periodic Review included India, UK, Netherlands and Philippines; the issue of freedom of religion or belief was raised but did not prove contentious nor occupy centre stage.

May 2008:

As a member of the Advisory Board of the newly founded Doha International Center for Inter-faith Dialogue (DICID) I attended the Sixth Doha Conference where Muslims, Jews and Christians addressed the issue “Religious Values: Perspectives on Peace and Respect for Life”; I chaired a session on “Human Trafficking...”. In private meetings I gave news of IARF youth projects and encouraged DICID to sponsor such engagements.

I attended the “Inter-Religious Encounter: Shared Values for a Changing Europe” hosted by the Campana Foundation in Rovereto, Italy, and by Religions for Peace, Europe (WCRP/Europe) with the patronage of the Council of Europe; other IARF members were present and there was strong commitment to co-operation between inter-faith movements. I had been a member of the planning committee and co-ordinated the final declaration.

June 2008:

During the Sixth Session of the UN Human Rights Council the soon to be out-going High Commissioner, Ms Louise Arbour, underlined the importance of the freedom of religion or belief. The Special Rapporteur, Ms Asma Jahangir, took part in the Cole Durham Conference held in parallel with the session on the theme “Freedom of Religion and Belief and Protecting Vulnerable Identities”; I addressed this conference and shared perspectives from IARF past and present.

I was honoured to participate in Kyoto and Osaka, Japan, in a meeting which prepared “A Proposal from People of Religion to Leaders of the Group of Eight”. The commitment made in relation to religious and ethnic diversity built on many of the experiences and convictions of IARF, the leadership of which was prominent in the organization of the meeting.

September 2008:

The celebration of the 60th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was the subject of the annual UN Department of Public Information conference which was held at the headquarters of UNESCO in Paris, 3 to 5 September. Some 2000 participants from around the world took part in this major event and IARF was one of several NGOs with representatives at the Office of the High Commissioner for Human rights in Geneva which were invited to take part; our Special NGO Committee on Human Rights led one of the sessions. I had an opportunity to join with other colleagues to meet the Assistant Director of UNESCO in charge of cultural affairs; we had a lively discussion as to why we felt it important to include religion in definitions of culture, and in particular how we should welcome the participation of UNESCO in the proposed Decade of Interreligious and Intercultural Dialogue, Understanding and Cooperation for Peace.

It was a particular pleasure to welcome Rev Taketani and his family as they settled in Geneva as representative of Rissho Kosei Kai, replacing Rev Yasuo Sawahata with whom I had had such happy collaboration.

October 2008:

After the disappointingly superficial interfaith panel in March and after continuing abortive and divisive discussions in previous sessions of the UN Human Rights Council around the issue of “defamation of religions” an Expert Seminar was held 2 – 3 October on the linkages between Articles 19 and 20 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) entitled “Freedom of expression and advocacy of religious hatred that constitutes incitement to discrimination, hostility or violence”.

The very good contributions from experts, including Ms Asma Jahangir, pointed to the dangers of trying to legislate against “defamation” suffered by whole communities as opposed to individuals and also pointed to existing provisions, however incompletely applied, which formally prohibit “incitement to discrimination, hostility or violence”. The interest of all parties was to protect the interconnected rights of freedom of religion or belief and freedom of expression without imposing punitive and counter-productive legislation or international standards. Unfortunately the seminar was marred by some *ad personam* attacks on Ms Asma Jahangir. I was asked by fellow NGOs to write a formal letter to the High Commissioner expressing our disappointment at this.

November 2009:

I took part in meetings in Geneva and in a conference call with NY about the reference in the UN General Assembly to the proposed Decade of Interreligious and Intercultural Dialogue, Understanding and Cooperation for Peace. Discussion between all major inter-faith organizations, UN agencies and interested governments is continuing in a most constructive way and should lead, at a meeting near NY in March 2009, hopefully with the participation of IARF, to the establishment of a formal coalition to promote the proposed Decade.

I was invited to a meeting in Paris of the Executive Committee of Religions for Peace, Europe, with representatives of numerous inter-faith councils in Europe; the contribution of IARF at many levels was widely recognized and appreciated.

- John Taylor