

HARMONY

NEWSLETTER OF IARF, BANGLADESH CHAPTER



Issue-1, December 2007

Message

Bangladesh Chapter of International Association for Religious Freedom (IARF) is publishing the first issue of its newsletter Harmony. It has not been an easy task for us to make it possible. A team of dedicated members of IARF worked hard to publish the newsletter. We have the constraints of financial resources and physical facilities. But we believe, our commitment is our capital.

Through this publication we intend to disseminate the message of harmony in diversity among people and reach those philanthropists who want to work for establishing peace in a society torn with conflict and mistrust. We earnestly desire unity of enlightened and peace loving forces of the country and the world as a whole.

Dr. Kazi Nurul Islam
President
IARF, Bangladesh Chapter



Father Timm addressing the workshop on human rights and the contemporary world

Workshop on Human Rights and the Contemporary World

IARF, Bangladesh Chapter in collaboration with the Department of World Religions, Dhaka University organized a two day workshop on human rights and the contemporary world on February 4 and 5, 2006.

Dr. Kazi Nurul Islam chaired the opening session and Fr. Dr. Richard W. Timm, former Principal of Dhaka Notre Dame College and recipient of the prestigious Magsaysay Award attended as the chief guest.

A strong advocate of human rights Fr. Tim called upon the rights activists to ensure religious freedom of all individuals and communities. "Human rights can never be protected without religious freedom," he said.

Members of IARF and teachers and students of the World Religion Department attended the workshop.

Editorial

Publication of this newsletter is a humble effort to unite the people who sincerely desire peace and love to replace conflict and hatred in the society.

IARF Bangladesh Chapter has organized a number of Human Rights Education Training sessions for the young people in and outside Dhaka. Some other seminars and workshops were also organized under the banner of the Chapter. This newsletter is a reflection of these activities which may inspire the members of IARF and others to take forward the movement of establishing religious freedom and human rights. We earnestly solicit cooperation and support of peace loving people in this regard.

IARF - Committed to Promote Religious Freedom and Human Rights

International Association for Religious Freedom (IARF) was established in the year 1899 at Oxford, UK. This first international interfaith association was created by group of committed and competent liberal religious thinkers. The Association works with religious communities and secular organizations that are committed to openness, free religious curiosity, human dignity, equal rights for human beings and social responsibility. It works for religious freedom and protection of other fundamental human rights through its representatives at the UN. During last century, IARF organized 30 world congresses involving important personalities committed to the cause of religious freedom and human rights. Statement of purpose of IARF is

"To work for freedom of religion and belief because it is a precious human right that potentially enables the best within our religious lives, or our search for truth or enlightenment, to flourish".



Professor Montaz Ali Khan addressing the inaugural ceremony of IARF, Bangladesh Chapter

A country for its membership of IARF requires to work for enhancing:

- Freedom from oppressive interference or discrimination by the state
- Mutual understanding, respect and promotion of harmony, or at least "tolerance" and
- Accountability by religious communities to ensure that their own practices uphold the fundamental dignity and human rights of their members and others.

Bangladesh Chapter: The journey starts

In 2003, the Founding Chairman of the Department of World Religion, University of Dhaka Professor (Dr.) Kazi Nurul Islam had a contact with the General Secretary of IARF who requested him to open a Chapter of the Association in Bangladesh. With his initiative and support of some other liberal thinkers of different religions, a new Chapter of IARF started functioning in Bangladesh in the same year.

An Executive Committee of IARF Bangladesh Chapter was formed through a General Meeting with Dr. Kazi Nurul Islam as the Founding President. Followers of different religions like Islam, Hinduism, Christianity, Buddhism and Bahaiism were included in the committee.

With minimum financial resources and firm commitment of the members, IARF, Bangladesh Chapter started its journey and organized a number of seminars and training sessions on religious harmony and human rights involving activists, scholars and young people.

A seminar on Human Rights and Religious Harmony was organized at the conference room of the Faculty of Arts, University of Dhaka on the occasion of the launching of Bangladesh Chapter of IARF. Professor Momtaz Ali Khan, the then Chairperson of the South Asia Coordination Council (SACC) of IARF addressed the seminar as the chief guest whereas Dr. Kazi Nurul Islam chaired the event.

Professor Khan in his address stressed upon creating awareness among the young people on equal rights and mutual respect and their active involvement in the program.

Quotes

"Human rights and religious freedom are inseparable. One cannot go without the other."

- Father Richard Tim

"All religions and faiths have the same message - Love to prevail and hatred to end."

- Dr. Kazi Nurul Islam

"The world is one country; human beings are its citizens."

- Professor Mozghan Shamsi Bahar

Human Rights Education Training

IARF with the funding support of the Dutch Government and technical assistance of People's Movement for Human Rights Education (PDHRE), produced a

package of educational materials to be used in promoting freedom of religion and belief. The package includes three videos showing typical situation of denial of religious rights, and an accompanying manual for training programmes in Bangladesh, India, Philippines and South Africa. The three videos are Rita's Choices, The Sacred Grove and Where is Home.

Before going for the production, a planning meeting was held in Oxford in April, 2004. Experts of IARF and PDHRE and representatives of the four concerned countries attended the meeting. Mr. Md. Shahid Hossain represented Bangladesh Chapter of IARF.

Prior to commencement of the training series, a Training of Trainers on Human Rights Education



Mr. Thomas Mathew, Chairperson of South Asia Coordination Council of IARF addressing a session of HRE training

(HRE) was jointly organized by PDHRE and IARF at Rama Krishna Mission, Kolkata in August, 2005. The course "Training of Trainers on United Nations Declaration on the Elimination of all forms of Intolerance and Discrimination based on Religion or Belief" involved participants from Bangladesh and India. A panel of eight participants from Bangladesh attended the course.

The trainees spontaneously participated in the plenary and group sessions. They could identify the rights violated in the videos shown to them. They also related the issues with the human rights situation in Bangladesh. They made some creative presentations on HR with the elements of entertainment. Many of the participants expressed their keen interest in working as human rights activist. They also made some



A session of HRE training



Dr. Kazi Nurul Islam addressing a session of HRE training



Rev. Suddhananda Mahathero addressing a session of HRE training

A significant activity of the Chapter so far has been the organizing of HRE training involving young people of different religions which include Muslim, Hindu, Christian, Buddhist and Bahai. The trainers who received training in Kolkata conducted the series training courses. A total of twelve such series were conducted in Dhaka, Bogra, Mymensingh and Munshiganj.

recommendations for protection of religious rights and identified their role in ensuring interfaith harmony in the community.

At the end of each training, an evaluation was conducted through a set questionnaire.

The training series aimed to:

1. Explain Universal Declaration of Human Rights and their implication
2. Identify the violation of rights affecting particularly the minority groups in respect of religion, sect and culture.
3. Raise voice against violation of human rights and play pro-active role in promoting the rights issues.

Each series of the course was divided into five sessions. Participatory discussion took place on Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) and discrimination against religious minority groups. Three videos were shown in the sessions and participants were asked to identify the incidences of violation of religious rights in the stories.

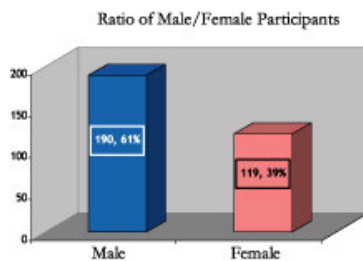
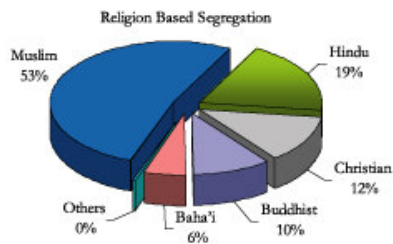


A session of HRE training

HRE Training Participants

Both male and female youths of different religions of Bangladesh attended the HRE training series. A total of 309 participants took part in twelve training series conducted from February 2006 to February 2007. Out of them 190 were males and 119 were females.

Religion wise segregation of participants was: Muslim-161, Hindu-60, Christian-38, Buddhist-32, Baha'i-17 and one participant of indigenous faith.



A section of participants of HRE training held at the Kamalapur Buddhist Temple, Dhaka

Pool of Trainers

The following resource persons conducted the HRE training sessions:

Dr. Kazi Nurul Islam, Dr. Rowshan Ara Feroze, Mr. Md. Shahid Hossain, Prof. Dalem Chandra Barman, Prof. Nusrat Sultana, Ms. Ruth Halder, Dr. Md. Shafiqul Islam, Mr. Rahim Sarwar, Mr. Abu Taher

Training Administrator : *Mr. Sohel Molla*

Training Associates : *Mr. Md. Ziaul Ahsan and Mr. Abdur Rahim*



Panel discussion at the general meeting of IARF

General Meeting of IARF

The general meeting of International Association for Religions Freedom (IARF) was held at Clearwater, Florida, USA during 24-29 July 2007. Professor Dr. Rowshan Ara joined the general meeting as Acting the general meeting as Acting President of Bangladesh Chapter of IARF. Dr. Rowshan Ara shared her valuable experience with the delegates about the interfaith programmes in Bangladesh. She also participated in the panel discussion on "Can religions co-exist in today's world?"

Seminar at the Centre for Advanced Research in Humanities

IARF, in collaboration with Centre for Advanced Research in Humanities of Dhaka University organized a seminar on Baha'i Faith and World Peace at the auditorium of the centre on December 1, 2007. Professor Kazi Nurul Islam, Director of the centre and President of IARF, Bangladesh Chapter presided over the seminar.

Professor Mozghan Shamsi Bahar, of the Department of English of the American International University of Bangladesh, Vice President of IARF, Bangladesh Chapter and a Baha'i peace activist presented the key note paper.

Among others, Professor Rowshan Ara Feroze and Mr. Md. Shahid Hossain, Vice President and General Secretary respectively of IARF, Bangladesh Chapter discussed on the article.

Professor Bahar in her paper categorically emphasized upon the urgent need for establishing strong unity among the people of all nations, religions and cultures for ensuring peace to prevail in the world.

Referring to the teachings of Bahauallah she mentioned, there cannot be any difference and discrimination among the creations of the same Creator. She also referred to the social issues like education, poverty reduction, gender equality which are essential for removing inequality and hatred from the society and building unity and peace in the world.

While discussing on the paper Professor Rowshan Ara said, proper interpretation of religion will foster peace and establish harmony in the society. She stressed the need for education and women empowerment for promoting social equality.

Referring to the paper presented, the other discussant Mr. Shahid Hossain said, unity of mankind and global peace are complementary to each other. Unity can remove discrimination and build a peaceful society.

Dr. Kazi Nurul Islam in his presidential remarks called for



Seminar on 'the Bahai Faith and World Peace'

realizing and practicing the true spirit of religions. A true follower of any religion cannot hate a follower of another religion, he said. The participants of the seminar eagerly wanted to know more about the Baha'i faith and its rituals.

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