



UNHCR

United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
Haut Commissariat des Nations Unies pour les réfugiés

**Sixth session of the Forum on Minority Issues
"Guaranteeing the Rights of Religious Minorities"
Item V. Promotion of constructive interfaith dialogue, consultation and exchange
(Room XX, Palais des Nations)**

UNHCR's engagement with faith-based organizations, faith leaders and communities of faith

Remarks by José Riera
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Like the rest of the United Nations, UNHCR is a highly secular organization. But the very nature of our work means we cannot be 'faith-blind' or 'faith-phobic,' as long as the red lines are clearly delineated: no conditionality, no proselytizing, and no denigration of other faiths.

In December 2012, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees hosted a Dialogue on Faith and Protection. This was the first formal inter-faith dialogue UNHCR has ever engaged in. We were inspired by the ground-breaking work done, for example, by UNFPA and UN-AIDS.

The Dialogue on Faith and Protection explored how the notion of 'protecting the other' – the refugee, the migrant, the internally displaced and stateless people – springs from long and widely shared religious values and traditions. We were able to confirm that all main faiths share significant core values that contribute to strengthening asylum and the protection of refugees, internally displaced and stateless people.

The Dialogue gave UNHCR the opportunity to reaffirm our own engagement and cooperation with faith-based organizations, faith leaders and local religious communities in discharging our core mandate. It also generated a deeper appreciation of the role that faith plays in providing moral and spiritual sustenance to those we serve in times of crisis and moments of despair.

Over the past 11 months, thanks to the commitment and energy of UNHCR's many faith-based partners and friends, we have set in train three important follow-up actions that I would like to highlight here today.

1. Good practice examples of the work of faith-based organizations and local faith communities in contributing to protection

The first work stream explored lessons learned and identified good practices from the engagement of faith-based organizations, faith leaders and religious communities in protection-related activities. We have been working with faith-based organizations like the Lutheran World Federation and the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society since our creation over six decades ago. Important newcomers to this cooperation are Islamic Relief and Islamic Relief Worldwide.

We invited UNHCR colleagues and faith-based partners to contribute to a compilation of examples from the field where we achieved a positive protection outcome for those we serve in partnership with local faith communities, their faith leaders and organizations. The response was overwhelmingly positive. The survey helped UNHCR to compile over 50 examples that explored the impact of faith identities, motivations and structures; the strengths and weaknesses of partnership; and the lessons learned from the experience.¹

2. Affirmation of Welcome for Faith Leaders

The second work stream developed specific guidance for faith leaders, encouraging them to welcome migrants, refugees and other forcibly displaced people in their communities, and to stand together against intolerance, exclusion and xenophobia.

Between January and April 2013, a coalition of faiths and UNHCR staff pursued a recommendation to develop guidance for faith leaders and drafted a text that consists of 16 affirmations in the first person. The document, entitled *Welcoming the Stranger: Affirmations for Faith Leaders*, is a call to deepen dialogue and cooperation within and across faith communities, and to work toward the common goal of protecting the world's forcibly displaced. They are available in Arabic, English, French, Russian, Spanish, German, Hebrew and Turkish.²

A formal launch of the Affirmation of Welcome took place at the *Religions for Peace IX* World Assembly in Vienna last week, which adopted the text by acclamation, following a symbolic signing ceremony with representatives of the world's major religions. The World Council of Churches Assembly also endorsed the Affirmation last month in Busan, South Korea, following similar action by the Lutheran World Federation, the World Evangelical Alliance, World Vision International, the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society, and other groups.

3. 'Faith literacy' training and materials for UNHCR staff and partners

The third work stream looks inward at UNHCR. We are developing guidance for UNHCR and partner staff on the multiple dimensions of faith in the context of displacement and the 'how to' of dealing with, outreach to and partnering with faith-based organizations.

It will draw on the survey and the Affirmations I have just described, and will be informed by the second United Nations System Staff College course on 'Partnering with Faith Organisations' that we helped to organize last month in partnership with UNFPA, UN-AIDS, UNICEF and a number of faith-based organizations. This year's course explored the linkages between faith and health, development and humanitarian work. It provided an opportunity for staff from a range of organizations to share their experience of engaging with faith communities and organizations in the course of their respective work.³

¹ The survey has been distilled into two documents. Examples of Good Practice: Preliminary Overview (<http://www.unhcr.org/51b6debe9.html>) and Protection Outcomes (<http://www.unhcr.org/51b6df179.html>) deriving from the survey of good practice examples were published and presented during a Side Event on Faith and Protection at the June 2013 UNHCR Annual Consultations with NGOs. In collaboration with co-organizers of the Side Event, a note summarizing key points and recommendations was submitted for publication in the Report on the Annual Consultations with NGOs (<http://www.unhcr.org/ngo-consultations/index.html>).

² <http://www.unhcr.org/51b6de419.html>

³ Due to the growing interest in the topic, the editors of the University of Oxford's Forced Migration Review (FMR) have agreed to dedicate an issue to 'Faith-based organisations and responses to displacement'. FMR expressed a keen interest in receiving examples of good, replicable practice and experience as well as sound analysis of faith-related issues, including those that reflect the experience and knowledge of communities and individuals directly affected by displacement. See www.fmreview.org/faith.

Conclusion

The Dialogue was a 'journey of mutual discovery' for UNHCR and a group of faith leaders and faith-based organizations from around the world. In a polarized world where religion is often perceived to be a divisive force, the Dialogue served to strengthen commitment to engage on faith issues and recognize the role of FBOs, local faith communities, and religious leaders in promoting welcoming communities and the protection of those we serve.