



international association for

religious freedom

belief with integrity

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2003 Council Engages with Current Challenges

When the IARF was founded in 1900, it stood almost alone as an interfaith community and the uniqueness of our World Congresses attracted thousands. Today, however, such inter-religious gatherings are more commonplace. We should be glad about this, but ready to change our priorities accordingly. Since 1972, we have engaged a paid International Secretariat and developed several regional offices. In concert with the times, IARF's Council recognised the need to develop concrete programmes centred around religious freedom and, hence, the birth of a new Strategic Plan (2001-2007). When it met in Oxford in March 2003 almost all of the Council's decisions addressed the three major questions facing the organisation today: Defining our Purpose, Developing Membership, and Increasing our Resources.

Defining our Purpose

The foundation of any organisation's work is its purpose. Thus, IARF's goal has been defined by the International Council as promoting the universal human right to Freedom of Religion or Belief, which has three essential pre-conditions, namely freedom from: (i) oppression or discrimination by the state; (ii) from intolerance by other religions, and (iii) from mistreat-

ment by one's own faith community. Each of these pre-conditions has to have programmes defined to further the prospects of freedom of religion or belief as follows:

- i. *working with government officials at the level of the United Nations;*
- ii. *promoting interfaith harmony and mutual understanding via our regional meetings, young adult activities, and congresses; and,*
- iii. *giving leadership to creating a declaration that clarifies the element of "religious responsibility" which must accompany demands for religious freedom.*



The IARF Secretariat, Risho Kosei-kai and the International Interfaith Centre share office space on the top floor of this building in central Oxford.

This March, the Council reviewed and accepted a recommendation that any one of these pre-conditions could of itself constitute an appropriate core objective for the IARF membership of a particular country or region.

Developing Membership

IARF could easily have remained as a happy "family", but in reality the average age of its members was lengthening, its mission needed rethinking, and its finances were over-dependent on a few sources. IARF also needs to achieve greater diversity by including more of the mainstream religious traditions. Therefore, the Council encouraged a policy of admitting new member organisations with a target of 170 by 2007. We now have a total of 104 member groups and 13 national chapters. Chapter development in industrial societies, where the membership is growing older, remains less clear. We need to find a way to relate IARF's mission to a younger generation. IARF's Religious Freedom Young Adult Network (RFYN) is a major step forward, but it remains in the early stages of implementation and is very labour-intensive.

The Council also examined the perennial question of whom it will not admit into membership, there being some religious or belief communities which, as the Council noted, "fall outside the values or norms of, or acceptability to, our existing membership". This view does not limit our respect for their right to freedom of religion or belief in accordance with international law,

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it simply recognises that there is the requirement of *mutual compatibility* for those who choose to work together co-operatively.

Communications with a worldwide membership also remains a challenge. The Council appointed a small Editorial Committee to report to the March 2004 Council on which media are most effective. We hope that members will send in their views via the Secretariat.

Increasing our Resources

Having enough resources is vital to the smooth operation of any organisation. At IARF we need to distinguish between two streams of funds:

- 1 *The cost of the overall operation or the organisation, which should be covered by the membership; and,*
- 2 *The funding of the programmes.*

Per above, membership contributions only tend to cover national chapter and regional expenditure, and relatively little is available for international use. While the Rissho Kosei Kai, the Japanese Liaison Committee, and the Unitarian Universalist Association have faithfully shouldered the majority of overhead costs to date, it is unwise to continue to rely on only a few main funders for support. We have thus asked other members to raise their giving where possible, and to consider remembering us in their wills. Currently, we are grateful to four member organisation which, together, have given additional grants of \$12,800 in the year to March 2003.

The IARF still had had to function in a climate of increasing austerity, which has required cuts in expenditures of 25% in 2003 (down to about \$400,000). This task was accomplished by making the European and North American regions self-financing and by not expanding our work to Africa or South America. Despite these measures, expected contribution

income will still be almost \$60,000 less than needed. Lack of this money requires staff restructuring or elimination of already limited programmes.

On this point, the Oxford Secretariat has been heavily engaged in seeking additional funds for programme work. Programmes currently under application for funding consist of:

- Programmes on 'Education About Religion,' supporting the initiatives of the UN.
- Development of educational tools (video and manual) for use by member groups.
- Building the Religious Freedom Young Adult Network (RFYN).
- Multi-faith outreach in New York.
- Developing a 'Declaration of Religious Freedom and Responsibility.'
- Ongoing communication about Freedom of Religion of Belief via the website (including Global Issues), an interfaith e-learning project, the "*IARF World*," and the promotion of IARF-produced literature.

In 2002, we received a little over \$140,000 from five sources, including a grant from the Rockefeller Foundation and a Congress sponsorship fund in the US. As this issue is prepared for printing, we have been informed by the Dutch Government that they have approved a grant to IARF of approximately \$250,000 over 3 years. While very good news, a part of this grant is to be shared with a partner organisation and, as it primarily covers programme work in South Asia, it restricts what can be allocated for the organisation's operational expenses. Over the past year, we have approached nine trusts or foundations, plus several government agencies, for funding. While there were several rejections, two have given a total of \$6,600 and one

promised to match a further \$5,000 if we can raise a similar sum. Four proposals are currently pending and one is at the enquiry stage. A focus on fundraising is not uncommon in these tough financial times, but there is also much "competition" in today's changed world of charitable giving.

Conclusion

In sum, the new Council set several priorities for the organisation: 1) Membership development; 2) Raising funds and balancing our budget; and 3) Programme development targeted on the next generation. If programme proposals move forward, we will also need to carefully evaluate them for effectiveness. The essential question for all of us to ask is, 'What difference is IARF making to advance the cause of freedom of religion and belief?'

Andrew C. Clark
General Secretary

Promoting Accountability

Do you remember the proposed 'Voluntary Code of Conduct for Religious & Belief Communities?' While now re-titled a 'Declaration of Religious Freedom and Responsibility,' there was heated debate about this IARF-initiated project at our 31st World Congress. (See full article in *IARF World*, January 2003.) We are very grateful to members and chapters who have formally submitted their views to the Secretariat. Overall, however, feedback has been limited. Work is expected to resume on this project in November so, if you have an opinion, we need to hear it soon! The Secretariat has prepared a questionnaire, which may assist your reflections. To obtain a copy, or to send comments, contact IARF headquarters in Oxford. (Address details are on the back of this newsletter).

Religious Freedom and the 'Terrorism Agenda'

In some ways, the terrorist incidents in New York on 11 September 2001 significantly shifted the climate for religious freedom. As this report investigates, there has been increasing discrimination toward the Muslim community, the erosion of civil liberties, and the adoption of anti-terrorism laws that have illegitimately restricted the rights of believers. At a more basic level, however, why is 'religion' connected at all with 'terrorism?' Most faith communities would argue that the terms are mutually exclusive. Alas, there is a growing presumption in society that a devout believer in a religion or belief is more likely to undertake an act of terrorism. After all, the promise of an ultimate reward in the afterlife makes any worldly deterrent for something like a suicide bombing seem irrelevant. It is such connections between 'religion' and 'terrorism' that have led governments to overreact in some cases. All the more reason then for religious leaders themselves to voice clear prohibitions on mis-using the name of religion to justify violence.

State Responses

Many countries have passed anti-terrorism legislation over the past 2 years. While there is nothing inherently wrong in states seeking greater security from terrorist threats, it is a problem when states ignore human rights standards to pursue this agenda. A July 2003 report from the *International Helsinki Federation* notes that "security concerns are increasingly used to justify restrictive policies against minority believers." The report cites Uzbekistan's campaign against independent Muslims, the monitoring of minority religious communities in Turkmenistan and

Bulgaria, and problems with the vague wording of Russia's anti-extremism law. Germany's new Association Law, which reportedly gives the government unfettered discretion to investigate, and/or ban, minority religious groups in the name of pursuing terrorists, has also been of concern to human rights activists.

A UN report released in late September 2003 noted that the terrorist attacks against the US in 2001 have been used by many countries as an excuse for a crackdown on religion, especially in Central Asia. The report says, "Many States have



A man praying in a mosque. Kabul 1988

taken the simplistic view that, since religions are at the root of many terrorist acts, the most direct means of preventing such acts is to limit the exercise of religion." While states have a duty to punish those committing terrorist acts and to prevent further atrocities, they must themselves adhere to a rule of law. If not, injustices against legitimate believers can, in turn, cause radical responses.

Impacts on Individuals

The most worrying development vis-à-vis the 'war on terrorism' has been the discrimination suffered by those of Muslim or Arab background. A 2003 report from the *UN's Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC)* concluded that there had been a resurgence in attacks and assaults on this group, their property, and places of worship. While occurring in various parts of the world, most of the incidents were taking place in North America and Europe. A report from *Human Rights Watch* in late 2002 examined accounts of thousands of interrogations (in N. America) of those who 'might have information' about terrorist activity. Perhaps this would not be surprising were it not for the fact that many of the arrests have been arbitrary and based solely on the origin and religion of those accused. Both those specialising in international law and civil liberties have expressed understandable concern about these developments, not to mention use of military tribunals and the secrecy surrounding judicial procedures.

The Legal View

In terms of religious discrimination, there are very few permissible restrictions on the freedom of religion or belief. Article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights states, "Freedom to manifest one's religion or beliefs may be subject only to such limitations as are prescribed by law and are necessary to protect public safety, order, health, or morals or the fundamental rights and freedoms of others." National security is not a grounds for limitation and, overall, limitations to freedom of religion or belief are the exception and not the

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rule. A statement of the *US Mission to the OSCE* (Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe) further indicates, "if a government believes funds of a religious group are being misused to finance terrorism, intervention should not infringe on an individual or group's right to worship." Furthermore, great care must be taken to punish individuals involved in criminal activity, but not whole religious communities.

Religion's Role

Of course, legal rights and how people actually treat each other are often two different things. After 11 September, world leaders took pains to reiterate that the religion of Islam should not be blamed for the actions of a few. One wonders, however, whether this message has filtered down. The *ECOSOC* report noted above chronicles a regrettable promotion of intolerance by the media and intellectuals towards the culture and values of Islam. Further, a poll conducted by the Pew Research

Centre for People and the Press in Summer 2003 indicated that 44% of Americans believed that Islam encourages violence. Although far from true, such stereotypes make interfaith dialogue that much more difficult.

A statement from an OSCE-sponsored conference on the role of religion in combating terrorism, October 2002, noted that "the recourse to terrorism under the name of religion does not demonstrate a clash of cultures, but a clash based on ignorance ... violence and terrorism are incompatible with the authentic spirit of religion." Regrettably, religious leaders themselves are often to blame for inciting their followers to inter-religious discord and hatred. Silence is not always a virtue either. In an article in *Interreligious Insight*, Rabbi Tony Bayfield indites Jewish, Christian and Muslim leaders alike for their collective failures "to denounce fundamentalism and to stand together in affirmation of shared values."

Making a Difference

In the end though, it is everyone's responsibility to change a climate of intolerance. As Dr Abduljalil Sajid, Imam of the Brighton Islamic Mission in the UK, said at the same above-noted conference, terrorism and extremism are symptoms of a problem, but not the actual cause. Thus, "in order to combat and eradicate these evils altogether, our long-term goal should be to eliminate the underlying social and political causes that breed them. We must continue fighting against racism, anti-Semitism, Islamophobia, xenophobia, and bigotry in words and deeds in all aspects of our society. Paralleling our actions against terrorism, we must have equally vigorous efforts to enhance freedom, human dignity, justice, and humanitarian values." IARF's focus on preventive strategies, such as education about religion, aims to contribute to these goals.

Zarrin T. Caldwell
Issues and Research Co-ordinator

An Update on the RFYN

The last edition of the IARF newsletter (January 2003) gave a brief description of the Religious Freedom Young Adult Network (RFYN). Here, we highlight some of the experiences of the young adults involved in the RFYN (ages 18-35) and projects that they have proposed. We begin with a review of a recent project in the Philippines.

Interfaith Pilgrimage in the Philippines

From 21-28 April, 2003, twenty-four young adults took part in a pilgrimage that included visiting sites of spiritual interest, engaging in interfaith dialogue, and building leadership skills. Participants included

representatives of ten tribes of Indigenous People and four major groups of Muslims from Mindanao, Christians and Unitarians from the Visayas, and another Indigenous young adult from Luzon in the

understanding of each other's beliefs and learned the valuable role of interfaith dialogue. They also had an opportunity to explore the underlying meanings of Article 18 of the UN Declaration of Human Rights (on freedom of religion or belief).

The pilgrimage took participants to Cotabato, Dumaguete, Bacong, Sibulan, and Cebu. One of the highlights of the tour, according to the young adults, was the opportunity to listen to the descendants of the first inter-marriage between the Isuruken tribe and the Muslims. An elder



Participants enjoy the 'Cultural Night'.

Photo Credit: IARF Philippines

spoke of how this marriage had once united people of different beliefs. The young adult group also travelled to Aroman, Carmen where they

spoke of how this marriage had once united people of different beliefs. The young adult group also travelled to Aroman, Carmen where they

witnessed Ileanen tribal rituals. At the beginning of the ceremony, the elders called upon the spirit to verify the group's good intentions. After the ritual, one of the elders showed the group the "Holy Ground" of the Ileanen people, where each of them had to throw a grain that had been prepared as an offering. At a Taoist Temple, visited later on the tour, the young people were similarly taught about the rituals and use of seeds, sticks, etc.

Over the week, meetings were arranged with a mayor, a congressman, and a city counsellor, at which the young adults were commended for their work. The group also visited a mosque and various Christian sites on their tour, with the opportunity to meet and share with other young people at their own places of worship. Finally, training sessions for the young people were part of the week's activities and focused on improving teambuilding and leadership skills. The closing program was held at the Unitarian Universalist Church of the Philippines.

The outcomes of this tour are very promising. Three young adults from each island were elected together with a young adult coordinator, with the aim of encouraging further collaborative work. This project was funded by the Hibbert Trust, UK; the Remonstrant Church, Netherlands; and Rissho Kosei-kai, Japan. It involved an International Council member and several other IARF colleagues in the Philippines.

Discussion Groups and Creative Workshops

Within every RFYN project, young adults are encouraged to have discussion that includes the sharing of spiritual traditions. In some cases, the main focus of discussion may be based on spiritual texts. In Jerusalem, Israel, one young adult (Channel) is co-chairing such a group with Jewish and Muslim young adults. At Rice University, Texas, USA, another (Dustin) has

helped to organise small circle group discussions and seminars based on religious freedom issues. In Canada, individuals at both Queens University in Kingston and at McGill University in Montreal are trying to start young adult campus groups. In India, a young adult leader in Gujarat is also working on the formation of an interfaith group and, in Vishakhapatnam, several workshops have already been held with local young adults. In Budapest, Hungary, an RFYN activist (Nora) is examining ways to incorporate drama into exploring interfaith and religious freedom concerns.

Multifaith Summits

In some situations, members of the RFYN network are endeavouring to bring together young adults from different traditions in order to learn



Learning about Islamic traditions at Dumaguete Mosque.

Photo Credit: IARF Philippines

more about freedom of religion and belief. Recent activity includes a youth interfaith summit held in Cape Town, South Africa in March 2003, which involved over 100 local people. An RFYN activist (Xolisa) was one of the organisers of the summit. (One of the aims of the RFYN is to provide young adults with opportunities for interfaith interaction that inspires them to take a leadership role.) Xolisa first got involved in interfaith work via the RFYN during the Gujarat project in India in December 2002. In Cape Town, he had the opportunity to address the participants and

share his views and experiences at the summit, which was favourably reported in the local press. He said, "If we know more about each other's faiths, then we can break down stereotypes and stop inaccurate information from spreading."

Looking to the Future

Young adults from IARF member groups in Japan and North America will have an experiential learning tour in Japan. Called "Building Bridges of Faith," this event is expected to take place in March 2004. The itinerary will enable participants to spend time at certain places of spiritual significance, mostly those of IARF's Japanese Liaison Committee members. The young adults will not only be focusing on gaining a deeper understanding of each other's traditions, but will be reflecting on the past, hearing inspirational stories, and considering concrete actions for their own areas.

In terms of action, part of the RFYN methodology is to incorporate "shramadan" or "a gift of labour" into certain projects. Such social action was a key element of our project in Gujarat, India in 2002 and further activities are being planned in Tirunelveli, Tenkasi, and Vishakhapatnam.

Finally, an element of leadership training is built into each large project in each region. The aim is to try to enable young people to engage in discussion with politicians and influential leaders (both secular and religious).

For more details on the RFYN and specific projects contact: Ramola Sundram, IARF Young Adult Programme Co-ordinator - ramola@iarf.net.



Quadrennial Report

Submitted to the United Nations, 1999 –2002

In 1972, the IARF received official 'category II consultative status' with the UN's Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), which was followed by the granting of 'general consultative status' in 1995. Just over 130 organisations hold this special status, as distinct from the several thousand organisations registered with ECOSOC overall. Key privileges are access to United Nations activities, as well as opportunities for our representatives to make formal interventions at the Commission on Human Rights and the Subcommittee on the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights.

Every 4 years, IARF is required to submit a Quadrennial Report to the UN's committee dealing with non-governmental organisations (NGOs). This committee must scrutinise a huge volume of reports and its membership comes from 19 different national delegations. After considerable postponements and questions, IARF's 1995-1998 report was accepted in May of this year! Orlanda Brugnola and Sue Nichols, our UN representatives in New York, were present on the three occasions that it was discussed. IARF was held to account and asked to explain its methodology, terminology, and sources for articles in IARF's newsletter to which our report referred.

In an article in issue 2/98 we had incorrectly referred to "Kashmir" instead of "Indian-administered Kashmir", which is the correct diplomatic designation for a disputed territory according to the Security Council, and we apologise for this error. We also failed in our comments about the situation of the Pandit community to take into



"Swords into Ploughshares" sculpture at the UN in New York.

account *inter alia* the views of the All Parties Hurriet Conference. We regret this omission and refer our members to various web sites available through www.google.com

Meanwhile, we have now submitted our report for the years 1999-2002 covering:

- The changes to our organisation's focus as reflected in our overall Statement of Purpose and Strategic Plan.

- Interventions made by Dr Gianfranco Rossi in Geneva on the violation of human rights and fundamental freedoms, religious intolerance, the human rights of women, the question of minorities, and the rights of the child.
- The support given to the role of the Special Rapporteur on questions of freedom of religion or belief and his attendance at IARF's World Congress in Budapest in 2002.
- The work of Dr John Taylor who was instrumental in re-starting the Geneva Committee on Freedom of Religion or Belief.
- Other activities in support of the anniversary of the 1981 Declaration, the New York Committee on Freedom of Religion or Belief, the Millennium Forum, and the 2001 Madrid Conference on education for tolerance in schools.

For copies of IARF's latest Quadrennial Report to the UN, contact the Oxford Secretariat on 44-1865-202-744 or at hq@iarf.net

In April 2003, the UN's Commission on Human Rights passed a resolution on "Combating Defamation of Religions." The resolution noted with concern that "defamation of religions is among the causes of social disharmony and leads to violations of human rights of their adherents." It noted that some regions of the world still experienced the "negative stereotyping of religions and manifestations of intolerance and discrimination in matters of religion or belief." The resolution further pointed out that the media is often used to incite acts of violence and discrimination on religious grounds. More specifically, it expressed concern over Islam being wrongly associated with human rights violations and over the "ethnic and religious profiling of Muslim minorities, in the aftermath of the tragic events of 11 September 2001." Besides calling for a report on the situation of Muslim and Arab peoples, the Commission urged states to take all appropriate measures to combat religious intolerance and to "encourage understanding, tolerance and respect in matters relating to freedom of religion or belief."

The Religious Heritage of Europe

Presentation of the European Convention's report to the Italian Presidency, July 2003.

Photo Credit: European Commission Audiovisual Library



Debate over the wording of a new European Constitution has been central to European policy development over this past year, with proposed references to the role of religion in the Constitution's preamble sparking significant controversy. Institutions like the Vatican pushed for references to Christianity and religion as central to the spiritual and cultural identity of Europe. Other groups, however, expressed concern about any dominant role for the church in a pluralistic Europe, which is composed of many religious affiliations and none. By June 2003, the revised draft of the European Constitution's preamble referred to "inspiration from the cultural, religious and humanist inheritance of Europe, which, always present in its heritage, has embedded within the life of society its perception of the central role of the human person and his inviolable and inalienable rights, and of respect for law."

To ensure that the rights of different religious communities were fairly represented in the new draft of the European Constitution, IARF's regional coordinator for Europe (Rev

Ilona Szent-Ivanyi Orbok) worked closely with other non-governmental organisations such as *Human Rights Without Frontiers*. This important topic was also addressed at workshops on religious freedom in Europe, which Ilona Orbok organised at the Wesley Theological College in Hungary in both March and June, 2003. The German Unitarians had earlier joined the debate in a conference held in late January 2003 and organised by IARF Council member, Horst Prem.

The IARF developed a position statement on this key debate as follows:

- The IARF recognizes that international law does not prohibit state support for religion, but only requires that any such support adheres to the principles of non-discrimination and equality before the law;
- IARF believes that the new European Union Constitutional Treaty must safeguard freedom of religion or belief and freedom of conscience; and,

- IARF does not agree that the Constitution should mention certain religions and beliefs and leave out others.

In other European news, IARF representatives joined a region-wide meeting sponsored by the *World Conference on Religion and Peace*, which was held in Graz, Austria in July 2003. Further collaborations are planned in programmes dealing with 'education about religion,' especially with a proposed round-table consultation in Africa by IARF's UN representative John Taylor.

Future projects in Europe include planning an interfaith forum with the Unitarians in the Czech Republic and working with *Collaboration for Democracy* on a workshop in Armenia. According to Ilona Orbok, religious life in Armenia is primarily associated with the Armenian Apostolic Church and very integrated with national identity. Mutual intolerance often exists between religious communities, with one of the most reported problems being the jailing of Jehovah's Witnesses for their conscientious objection to military service.

Contributions from:
Ilona Szent-Ivanyi Orbok
Europe and Middle East Regional Co-ordinator

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The first IARF update on the debate over the EU Constitution appeared in 'Global Issues' last fall. The Oxford Secretariat monitors an incoming flow of information and posts edited reports on the religious freedom situation in 6 selected countries. Check out the latest news, posted quarterly, at www.iarf.net under 'Global Issues'! If you do not have on-line access, you can receive a postal copy of these reports from the IARF Secretariat.

South Asia: Year in Review

South Asia is a region of vast social, religious, and cultural diversity. As such, there has been much scope for religious intolerance and communal violence. The religiously-motivated carnage that took place in Gujarat in early 2002 made world headlines. There are also growing instances of violations of human rights, including the right to freedom of religion and belief. These violations are fuelled by extremist ideologies, certain discriminatory policies of governments, and the internal practices and beliefs of faith communities themselves.

Against this backdrop, IARF has endeavoured to increase its presence in the region by working with faith communities to foster understanding and to protect and promote religious freedom. Over the last year, some notable developments have taken place in the region, including, in April 2003, the formation of two IARF Chapters in Bangladesh and Nepal. After a period of dormancy, the India Chapter has also been reactivated. In total, the region has 21 member groups.

India

Religious intolerance and violence in Indian society is compounded by politicisation of issues like the Ayodya temple dispute, caste discrimination, and the rise of Hindu and Islamic fundamentalism. The State Governments of Tamil Nadu and Gujarat both introduced anti-conversion bills over this past year, which caused widespread resentment among religious minorities.

Responses of IARF member groups have been diverse. Member groups in Tamil Nadu organised protest rallies and submitted memoranda to

the State Government to remind it that religious freedom is guaranteed by India's Constitution. IARF's member group in Kolkata, the Ramakrishna Mission, organised an Interfaith Day in February 2003, which addressed religious freedom topics. This event was attended by a remarkable 29,000 people, including youths from 1700 interfaith study circles.



Interfaith Day celebrated by Ramakrishna Mission, Kolkata February 2003.

Photo Credit: IARF Co-ordinating Council, South Asia

In April, Khwaja Gharib-un-Nawaz Welfare Centre (an IARF member group), took 18 of its members, mostly young adults of different faiths, to places of worship in North India. Other member groups such as the Interfaith Fellowship for Peace and Progress and the Bala Vikas



Visit to places of worship in North India by a team of member group, Khwaja Gharib - un - Nawaz Welfare Centre, Bangalore in April 2003.

Photo Credit: IARF Co-ordinating Council, South Asia

Foundation organised programmes for local communities and young people in order to create awareness of religious freedom and to promote interfaith understanding.

In February, the IARF South Asia Coordinating Council (SACC) organised a workshop for member groups at Visakhapatnam. The IARF Strategic Plan, Declaration of Responsibility, and activities conducted by member groups were discussed.

Last fall, SACC also organised a 4-day consultation meeting on "Rebuilding Common Cultural Heritage in Multi-Religious Societies in Asia". Ten renowned educators, interfaith workers, and researchers from India and Sri Lanka participated in a discussion facilitated by IARF's representative to the UN in

Geneva, Dr John Taylor (see *IARF World*, January 2003).

In August, members of SACC met with the leadership of two Hindu and Muslim organisations, as well as Christian groups at Nagpur. Discussion at these meetings revolved around plans for the coming months to enable young adults to learn about religious freedom. These projects would be done in conjunction with the chapters, member groups, and local communities in Visakhapatnam, Nagpur, and Tenkasi. Work on IARF's proposed 'Declaration of Religious Freedom and Responsibility' is also underway and will figure prominently with initiatives on human rights education.



Inauguration Ceremony, IARF Nepal.
Photo Credit: Fumiko Yasuda

Nepal

Religion is deeply rooted in Nepal with over 80% of a population of 25 million practising Hinduism. Minority faiths include Buddhists, Muslims, Christians, and Jains. In recent times, the peace of the country has been marred by the violent ways of Maoist rebels fighting the Government and monarchy. Although this violence grabs the headlines, there are also instances of minor Hindu-Muslim conflicts in some parts of the country. Many people within the Hindu community face caste discrimination and a steadily growing proselytising by Christian missionaries has also caused concern. The newly formed IARF Nepal Chapter will be working to improve the situation there. Formed in May 2003, the chapter has already hosted an inauguration ceremony (attended by 125 people) and sponsored both an art and essay competition at two secondary schools.

Sri Lanka

Although the two-decades long ethnic conflict between the Singhalas and Tamils is in a quiet phase, there are some disturbing trends which threaten the religious harmony on the island. Ethnic strife and politics could well take on religious colours. Hindu and Buddhist communities have taken a hostile opposition to conversions by Christian missionaries. As such, Christian churches and priests have

come under attack and the Government has passed a judgement against 'unethical conversions.' The IARF Sri Lanka Chapter is working with different religious groups to promote interfaith harmony and to prevent religious conflicts. It has 11 branches, mostly in the south of the country. The member group Interfaith Fellowship for Peace and Development organised interfaith camps for youths and children in late 2002.

Bangladesh

While traditionally a country exhibiting interreligious harmony, religious minorities have been particularly repressed after the present government came to power in 2001. With an overwhelming Muslim majority, Hindu, Buddhist

and Christian religious minorities in Bangladesh, and the Ahmediya Muslim sect, face discrimination and exclusion. The holy places of these communities have been attacked with innocent people killed or physically assaulted. Muslim fundamentalist groups have strongly infiltrated the political space and demanded an Islamic law for the country, applicable even for followers of other religions. These developments pose great challenges to the work of IARF in the country. The newly re-formed chapter is likely to start its work with a project on human rights education with particular emphasis on right to freedom of religion and belief.

Zulfikhar Akram
Co-ordinator, IARF SACC

News from North America

The United States Chapter of IARF is planning two conferences this fall and winter. The first is being held as this newsletter goes to print. It takes place from October 17-19 at the Grand Shrine (Shinto) of America in an idyllic rural setting near Seattle, Washington. The program will be led by the Chief Priest, the Rev Koichi Barrish. In



Natalie Gulbrandsen
Photo Credit: Kayoto Yokota

addition to experiencing the rituals and culture of Shinto, there will be circle groups and workshops. IARF members and friends from Canada and the United States plan to attend. From January 8-10, 2004, there will be a conference in Florida being planned by the Rev Abhi Janamanchi in cooperation with the National Conference of Community and Justice (NCCJ). The theme is "Under Siege: Religious Freedom in a Post 9/11 World." Please contact Doris Hunter (Revdrleen@aol.com) or Richard Kellaway (Ishmaelnb@operamail.com) in North America about details and registration fees. We encourage young adults to join us and hope to provide them with a reduced registration fee. The US Chapter Board accepted with regrets, but with deep appreciation, the resignation of Natalie Gulbrandsen as its co-chair beginning in October. Doris Hunter will continue for a period of transition until a new chair is appointed for the Chapter.

Contribution from Doris Hunter, USA Chapter

Report on Study Tour to ROC

Nine members of the Japan Liaison Committee of IARF (JLC) visited the Republic of China (Taiwan) from 25–28 September 2003 to study the lives and situation of the indigenous peoples. The JLC has organised several study tours to learn about minority indigenous groups.

In 2001, a trip was made to Hokkaido in the northern end of the Japanese archipelagos to study the Ainu people. In 2002, a group made a trip to Okinawa, at Japan's south end, to visit the Ryukyu people.

Tour Highlights

This year, the JLC visited the Republic of China (ROC) to learn about the indigenous tribes of the



At the Aboriginal Handicraft and Products Exhibition Centre

Photo Credit: Rev Yoshinobu Miyake

island. These tribes have ancient origins and a common ancestry with the people's of Madagascar, New Zealand, and Easter Island, among others. On the first part of the trip, JLC members visited the Commission of Indigenous Affairs of Kaohsiung City, the second biggest city in the ROC, and had a meeting with Mr Sasala Taiban, Chair of the Commission. The group also visited the Aboriginal Handicraft and Products Exhibition Center, which was established to encourage self support for the indigenous peoples under the

market economy and which organises exchange programmes.

On the second part of the trip, JLC visited the Indigenous People's Cultural Park, located in the deep mountain area. There, Mr Wu Chun-chen, the Director, provided some history of the indigenous people on the island. The JLC members were able to exchange thoughts and ideas with elderly indigenous people who could speak Japanese. The group gave a presentation on IARF, including its work on networking with minority peoples around the world. Finally, the group visited other religious communities, including the headquarters of *Fo Kuang Shan*, an IARF member group.

Indigenous History

In the 17th century, Holland occupied the island as a base for further conquests in East Asia. Subsequently, Koxinga, of the Min Dynasty of mainland China, was sent there and established a government in exile. On these occasions, indigenous peoples who had been living in the Western plains (the part closest to mainland China), were forced to evacuate to the Eastern (Pacific Ocean side) and its steeply mountainous areas.



Discussions with indigenous peoples at the Indigenous Peoples Culture Park, September 2003

Photo Credit: Rev Yoshinobu Miyake

The island was annexed by the Japanese Empire in 1895, and it recognised the unique languages and customs of the indigenous peoples. It offered free primary education to these non-literate cultures using the Japanese language. In 1949, the *Kuomintang* (Chinese Nationalist Party) set up Taipei as a new capital of the ROC. At many stages, the political forces of the time had their reasons to suppress the independence of indigenous peoples. Essentially, they were deprived of their human rights whenever their independent point of view interfered with larger political struggles and they were marginalised as a result.

Eventually, May 2000 proved a turning point for the island's indigenous peoples. Chen Shui-pien of *Minshintang* (Democratic Progressive Party) was democratically elected as the 10th President of the ROC. The party's platform included an official acknowledgement of the existence of the indigenous peoples.

The JLC and the indigenous peoples whom they met plan to stay in contact and continue to exchange ideas.

Rev Yoshinobu Miyake
International Council, IARF

The IARF takes this opportunity to welcome two new member groups in Japan, the Tamamitsu Jinja Religious Corporation and the Hiyoshi Shinto Shrine.

The **Tamamitsu Jinja Religious Corporation** was founded in 1932 by the late Kinue Motoyama. Its basic philosophy is based on the underlying universal nature of religion and the establishment of guiding principles for a global society. As such, it cooperates closely with other religious orders. Motoyama's successor, Dr Hiroshi Motoyama, has done further work on the authenticity and objectivity of mystical experience.

The **Hiyoshi Shinto Shrine**, one of the traditional Shinto shrines in Japan, is estimated to have been established in 771. "Hiyoshi" comes from the enshrined 3 Kamis, or heavenly deities. These are: *Onamuchi no kami* (Great Land Possessor), *Susano no mikoto* (Ruler of the Sea) and *Oyamagubi no kami* (Protector of Mount Hiei in Kyoto). The current chief priest of Hiyoshi Shinto Shrine is Rev Takahiro Miwa, who is from the 56th generation of priests. He has also been General Secretary of IARF's Japan Chapter for many years.

Member Contributions

Thank you to all the member groups, chapters, and individuals who have contributed to keeping the vital work of IARF going. As fundraising is increasingly difficult in today's financial climate, we remain dependant on your contributions.

Contributions for 2003 should have been sent to either your Regional Co-ordinator or the Oxford Secretariat by the middle of the year. Unfortunately, contributions from some member groups, chapters, and individuals have not yet reached us! Please let us know if you or your group is experiencing some difficulty in paying, or if you need to be sent an invoice in order to be able to release the funds.

The IARF Secretariat is counting on you!



People Column



Dinah Mayo

In August 2003, the IARF Secretariat bid a fond farewell to Dinah Mayo who has served as part-time Finance

Manager for nearly 5 years. Many of our members will remember Ms Mayo handling the financial transactions at IARF World Congresses in Vancouver and Budapest. She managed all of the financial accounting responsibilities of the International Secretariat, including the preparation of audits, reports on investments, managing back accounts, and budget forecasting for the International Council, among a diversity of related tasks. The Council and the rest of the Secretariat staff will miss her keen insights and contributions, but wish her well in a job that allows her to be closer to home and family.



Zulfikhar Akram

Following his successful work of some six months as International Project Organiser for IARF's youth project in Gujarat

(see IARF World, Mar-2002), Zulfikhar Akram was hired as IARF's Regional Co-ordinator for South Asia. Although belonging to the Muslim faith, Mr Akram has long been involved in interfaith initiatives, especially with the Khwaja Gharib un Nawaz Welfare Centre, a member group of IARF. He also worked for 6 years with the Christian Children's Fund in Bangalore in the capacities of Field Worker, Program Co-ordinator, and Sponsor Services Co-ordinator. In his current post, Mr Akram is responsible for assisting young adults, member groups, and 4 country chapters in South Asia with activities that promote religious freedom. This work is done through the South Asia Coordinating Council (SACC).



Margaret Paton

As the end of the year approaches, the IARF Secretariat will see the departure of Margaret Paton, General Office

Administrator/Co-ordinator. Joining the organisation in September 2000, Margaret must leave her post to care for parents. Besides undertaking all the administrative and secretarial tasks that enabled the Oxford Secretariat to run smoothly, Margaret has been instrumental in improving IARF's web site, in organising meetings of the International Council, and in co-ordinating arrangements for the World Congress in Budapest. With keen interests in computer technology and communications with IARF's membership, Margaret brought a wide range of abilities to her post and will be sorely missed.

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