



UNHCR

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

As delivered

*High Commissioner's Dialogue on Protection Challenges
Theme: Faith and Protection
(12-13 December 2012)*

Chairman's Summary

**António Guterres
United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees,**

Distinguished Participants, Dear Friends,

It would be impossible to sum up this very rich Dialogue in the short time we have left, so I just wish to make a few concluding remarks. First of all let me say how grateful I am to you all for having devoted so much time and energy to this meeting and for the very pertinent and constructive contributions you have made.

Listening to the range of interventions, I heard confirmed a strong convergence and complementarity between international protection and humanitarian principles as they relate to refugees, stateless people and the internally displaced on the one hand, and fundamental religious values and traditions on the other. In essence, the rule of law framework is built upon precepts that are shared by all major faiths.

At the human level, we took away from this discussion a deeper appreciation of how our lives and those of the people we serve are shaped by religion and spirituality. In the words of one participant, the uprooted person has two halves – material and spiritual. Both must be attended to. But in doing that, it is important not only to focus on needs, but also on rights.

Religion and spirituality motivate and propel individuals, communities and organisations to help those in need and to save them from danger. There was unanimous recognition of the valuable contributions that faith organisations and communities make to the protection of refugees and the displaced.

To be a secular organisation dealing with refugees does not mean UNHCR should ignore religion, but we must respect and value the faith of the people we care for. We must not

discriminate among people based on their religious beliefs, but to ignore faith would be to ignore its potential for preserving dignity and for finding solutions for the people we care for.

Let us not forget, however – and this was acknowledged by several participants – that violence and persecution are also perpetrated in the name of religion. To oppose religious intolerance, faith groups should be better integrated into conflict prevention and reconciliation strategies. The truth is that where religion is used to undermine the rights of people this normally is not done by religious leaders but by politicians who use religion for their purposes. It is very important for organisations like ours to keep this in mind and to be able to always make this distinction.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

In all of the conversations over the past two days, there was a strong consensus about the key principles of humanitarian work. One participant summed it up very well by saying “We must respond to need, not to creed.”

Among the key principles affirmed over and over again were humanity, impartiality, non-discrimination, respect for the beliefs of others, diversity, empowerment, equality and the protection against any form of conditionality. We have all very strongly embraced these humanitarian principles throughout these two days.

I am also very pleased about the number of concrete suggestions that were made during the three roundtable discussions, on creating welcoming communities, durable solutions, and partnerships. We will produce a more detailed summary to properly capture the richness of these conversations. Allow me only to highlight some of the most important points:

The first group recognized that asylum is not only provided by the state based on legal provisions, but that receiving communities play a central role in transforming the right to enjoy asylum into a reality. Faith leaders and communities, with the moral influence they wield and the large networks they enjoy, can make a powerful contribution to creating and maintaining positive attitudes towards foreigners and refugees in their communities.

This roundtable also noted the need for interreligious dialogue to promote peaceful coexistence, particularly where groups of refugees and displaced persons of different faiths are settled in the same location or where their faith differs from that of the community hosting them. The presence of refugees was seen as an opportunity for furthering dialogue across faiths.

Several good practices emerged from this discussion group, such as faith communities joining their advocacy efforts to combat xenophobia, cooperating closely with the police to prevent and report on hate crimes, and actively disseminating information to educate

congregations and encourage welcoming communities. Participants also discussed the protection of stateless people, and pointed out some practical ways faith-based organisations could assist them, for example through counseling, legal aid and by promoting birth registration.

The second roundtable explored the particular value faith-based actors can bring to the search for durable solutions, to complement what is primarily a state responsibility. Faith leaders can contribute to creating two conditions that are essential for durable solutions: political will, and what one participant called “space in the hearts and minds” of the host communities. These two things are among the most difficult ones to achieve for humanitarian actors, which highlights the importance of closer partnership with faith communities in this regard.

The discussion reconfirmed that faith-based actors have a role to play from the beginning of a crisis, with a view to promoting durable solutions before a refugee situation becomes protracted. They can help prevent conflict and address the root causes of displacement, assist refugees in making informed choices in exile, and play a central role in making solutions sustainable by helping refugees integrate in their new communities.

I would like to add here the interesting observations that were made during this panel discussion regarding the role faith-based actors can play in disaster risk reduction, and in mitigating the impact of climate change and other factors that are forcing people to move today but that are not among the grounds for seeking asylum set out in the 1951 Refugee Convention.

The third roundtable, on improving cooperation and partnership, stressed the importance of enhancing collaboration both among different faith-based actors and communities, and of faith-based actors with UNHCR, states and other stakeholders. We heard about some of the challenges local faith communities confront in working with humanitarian actors, which are mainly based on a lack of understanding of their role and potential, and limited access to established humanitarian coordination mechanisms.

The key recommendation that we take away from this discussion is the need for humanitarian actors, including UNHCR, to deepen their understanding of religious traditions across faiths and to become more ‘faith literate’. This means a better understanding not only of the central role of faith in the communities we work with, but more concretely of faith structures and networks, and of the different approaches needed for effectively engaging with different types of faith-based actors.

I also took note that many participants have emphasized that true partnership needs to be a two-way process, based on mutual respect, transparency and fundamental humanitarian principles. We need to be more inclusive and consult national faith actors already at the planning stage, to harness the full potential of the strengths they bring to complement our own approach.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

This has been a very rich and inspiring discussion, and one that certainly will not end when we leave this plenary room.

The Dialogue has brought to the fore a wide range of suggestions and good practices to build on our debate. We will take stock of all of them and continue to consult with you, to see how these ideas can be transformed into practice. The UNHCR-NGO Annual Consultations in 2013 will provide a good opportunity for continuing our discussion, as I am aware that many of you wish to keep alive the momentum created by this meeting.

Allow me now to sum up a few concrete recommendations that came out of the discussion this afternoon and the summary of the roundtables presented by the co-chairs.

One central proposal is to transform this meeting into a permanent network, starting from the informal taskforce that worked with us to prepare this Dialogue. I would suggest formalising this small group and opening it up to other interested faith-based organisations, and to use the annual NGO Consultations to review progress. This network could look into the development of partnership principles to guide UNHCR's engagement with faith-based organisations and the way to translate them into action; the preparation of training modules for UNHCR and the different organisations; an exchange of good practices; joint research projects; and common advocacy campaigns.

In addition to this, I would make three concrete follow-up suggestions. One addresses States, the second one addresses UNHCR and the third focuses on faith-based organisations.

First, addressing States. One of the conclusions of roundtable 1 stressed the importance of birth registration. We have been discussing with our Executive Committee how important it would be to have this body formally approve a conclusion on birth registration. This would complement the Human Rights Council's recent resolution, which essentially focused on birth registration for citizens. But we also need birth registration for refugees, the displaced, and potentially stateless people. I believe the faith-based organisations around this table share this concern. I count on the leadership of the current chair of the Executive Committee, Colombia, to support this and encourage member states to work together on an EXCOM conclusion on birth registration in 2013.

Second, a suggestion more related – but not limited – to UNHCR. I would like to propose that our Division of International Protection, in dialogue with the taskforce, prepare a faith literacy and freedom of religion project for the organization. This could include a guidance note for our staff, training modules, and together with other organisations, similar products that could be developed for purposes going beyond UNHCR activities. UNHCR should have

its own faith literacy programme, which could then also be shared with other actors interested in moving forward in this direction.

Third, as concerns faith-based organisations, I support the idea of a code of conduct for faith leaders in refugee and displacement situations which was put forward here so strongly. Rather than reinventing the wheel, this would focus on finding a common language to bring together everything that already unites all the faith-based organisations that are gathered here.

I suggest that some of the organisations that were part of the preparatory taskforce for this Dialogue (for example the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society, the Lutheran World Foundation, Islamic Relief, the Faculty of Buddhism at the Mahachulalongkorn University in Thailand and others) coordinate the preparation of a first draft to be shared with everyone and eventually presented at the 2013 NGO consultations. A similar process could be used for producing guidelines on interfaith work, another important aspect of partnership that was discussed here.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Thank you very much.