

Address by H.E. Ravinatha Aryasinha, Ambassador and Permanent Representative at the 2nd Dialogue of Faith, Peacebuilding & Development in commemoration of the World Interfaith Harmony Week -9 February 2017

I take this opportunity to thank Jordan and all the organizers of the 2nd Dialogue on Faith, Peacebuilding and Development, organized as part of the United Nations activities to commemorate the World Interfaith Harmony Week.

The preamble of the UNESCO constitution states and I quote

“Since wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the defences of peace must be constructed”. End of quote.

If one looks at the Nobel teachings and doctrines of major religions, faiths and beliefs practiced today, you will find each of them advocating for ways and means of achieving self-discipline - mental and physical. Peace & Security, Fundamental Rights and Sustainable Development are the corner stones of any stable and prosperous society. It is the basis of the United Nations that we all belong to.

The concept of ‘Peace building’, first gained unprecedented international focus in the 1992 report ‘An Agenda for Peace,’ by former UN Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali, which characterized peace building as an “action to identify and support structures, which will tend to strengthen and solidify peace in order to avoid a relapse into conflict.” The importance of generating the sense of ‘national ownership’ and ‘capacity building’ at all strata of society to manage conflicts was deemed important, as well as collective endeavor by both State and non-State stakeholders. It is to realize this aim that the UN General Assembly through its Resolution 60/80 and the simultaneous Security Council Resolution 1645 (2005), mandated a Peace Building Commission (PBC), “to bring together all relevant actors to marshal resources and to advise on and propose integrated strategies for post-conflict peace building and recovery”. These Resolutions also highlighted the need to have women playing a role in these processes¹.

In adopting the UN 2030 Agenda on Sustainable Development Goals, we in particular agreed for Goal 16, to “*promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels*”. In doing so, we agreed to;

- Significantly reduce all forms of violence and related death rates everywhere, (16.1)
- Promote the rule of law at national and international levels and ensure equal access to justice for all,(16.3)
- Develop effective, accountable and transparent institutions at all levels,(16.6)

¹ The Role of Women in Peace-building: a Sri Lankan Perspective, Ravinatha Aryasinha,

<http://www.lankamission.org/human-rights-humanitarian-affairs/1302-ambassador-aryasinha-speaks-on-the-role-of-women-in-peace-building-a-sri-lankan-perspective.html>

- Ensure responsive, inclusive, participatory and representative decision making at all levels,(16.7)
- Ensure public access to information and protect fundamental freedom, in accordance with national legislation and international agreements. (16.10)

In all above, we see a clear connection to building harmony, transparency and coherence in national endeavours of building a culture of peace. Resolution 53/243 of September 1999 and all related resolutions that followed have firmly paved the way for celebrating this week for world interfaith harmony, which are essential elements for peace and development.

Within this context, in sharing my perspectives on Faith, Peacebuilding and Development, it is natural that I reflect on the practice in my country, Sri Lanka, which is multi-religious, besides being a multi-ethnic and multi-cultural.

Sri Lanka embraced Buddhism with the arrival of Arahata Mahinda in the 3rd Century BC. Buddhism, a philosophy, a religion and a way of life is predominantly followed by Sri Lankans, while a significant number of adherents of Hinduism, Islam and Christianity. These religious communities have lived together in harmony with one another for centuries if not millennia.

The teachings of Buddhism including the concepts of metta, karuna, mudhita and upekkha, namely the contemplations of loving kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy and equanimity which set out the conduct of a person towards other living beings has been inter-woven into the fabric of our society through several millennia, passed from one generation to another, setting our social norms and our way of life. A central principle of Hinduism is the interconnectedness of all living beings, and the concept of Ahimsa : respect for all living beings and the avoidance of violence towards others. Similarly, a core teaching of Islam states that a person cannot be a complete believer unless he loves for his brother what he loves for himself, an essential pronouncement of love towards common humanity. The core of Christianity is considered its pronouncement to “love thy neighbour as thyself”. Therefore, the universality of humanity and ahimsa is deeply ingrained in to the Sri Lankan culture.

Thus, religion plays a significant aspect in the daily lives of the people of Sri Lanka and is given pride of place in many of our social interactions. The significance that religion plays is recognized by the public as well as the Government. Since becoming an independent country in 1948, many of our national events, with the blessings of the successive Governments, have integrated multi-religious observances, such as commemoration of the Independence Day, commencement of the first working day of the New Year, etc.

As a result, it has become an unwritten rule for all major national events under the patronage of the Government to involve the participation of religious leaders of the four main faiths/religions namely Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam and Christianity, and it is a unique sight to see the leaders of all the main religions being seated together and invoking blessings on the country and the people at these events. In addition, in recognition of the equality of religions, several public holidays have been declared over the decades in

respect of major events associated with the four religions. These include commemoration of Vesak, Ramzan, Deepavali, and Christmas - irrespective one's denomination and building a sense of unity.

No one can doubt that a peaceful society is a necessary condition for the development of a country, and as a country which witnessed the harmful effects of a 3 decades long conflict which inflicted heavy damage on the economy and the society as a whole, the Government of Sri Lanka is committed to ensure that the country moves forward, without a recurrence of the past. To this end, the National Unity Government of Sri Lanka which was elected in 2015 under the leadership of President Maithripala Sirisena and Prime Minister Ranil Wicremasinghe, has prioritized national reconciliation and sustainable development in the Government's programme of action. These aspects are also sought to be re-enforced through the ongoing constitutional reform process.

Several important measures have been pursued by the Government including:

- creating conducive conditions for inter-ethnic and inter-religious harmony, particularly focusing on children and youth at schools.
- integrating the concept of national reconciliation and integration, into the religious education, in building mutual trust, empathy, respect among children. In this way, the children from different ethnic and religious communities will be prepared to accept each other and see the common values that bind us together instead what sets us apart. In other words, the children will understand that diversity is not a threat but something that must be valued.
- Sri Lanka is also proud of its well-established system of Dhamma/religious schools associated with Buddhist, Hindu, Islam and Christian teachings and these are state sponsored with financial and material contributions from the Government. Teachers in these schools are well trained in the religious teachings and these schools often held over the weekend teach children from age 5 up to 18years. These schools have made a positive contribution to the society over the decades by inculcating the youth with the values and teachings of each faith that are being promulgated by them. As such these schools could be used as the vehicles for promoting tolerance, mutual acceptance and respect for differences which could act as a bridge to build a peaceful and stable society, by integrating teachings of other main religions and building networks with each other.

Therefore, as Sri Lanka progresses towards development and prosperity, we are equally considerate of the solid framework that faith and religions could provide and will be leveraging the religions as vehicles of peace to contribute in the process.

These practices in Sri Lanka not only reflect those in other parts of the world, but also lend themselves to replication worldwide.