

BUILDING A CULTURE OF PEACE THROUGH INTERFAITH DIALOGUE-- THE PHILIPPINE EXPERIENCE

**Delivered by MINISTER AND CONSUL GENERAL
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**UNITED NATIONS DAY
27 October 2015**

Central Jamaat E ahle Sunnat, Motzfeldtsgate 10, Oslo

Good evening. It's a pleasure for me to speak before you on the Philippines and its efforts to foster a culture of peace and understanding at the United Nations and other international forums through interfaith or interreligious dialogue.

I. The Philippines and Interfaith Dialogue

The Philippines is a multi-cultural, multi-ethnic and multi-religious country. It is home to 90 known ethnic groups with over 150 ethno-linguistic communities. While majority of Filipinos are Christian, a significant group (about five percent) are Muslim.

The history of the Philippines has always been characterized by the cultural and religious diversity found in our 7,107 islands. Amidst the layers of differences that set our ethnic peoples apart, and the inevitable conflicts that these cultural and religious differences bring, still, we continuously struggle to find unity and a shared identity as Filipinos. This is why we pursue an interfaith dialogue so that all Filipinos may be able to understand and respect the differences in their beliefs and their cultures.

As a multi-cultural, multi-ethnic and multi-religious country, the Philippines considers interreligious and intercultural dialogue and cooperation as a cornerstone of our state policy for peace and development. The Philippine Constitution allows the free exercise and enjoyment of religious worship. We believe that this approach contributes to the resolution of conflicts and upholds the principle of the inviolability of human dignity, particularly since it promotes tolerance and understanding amongst people with diverse ethnic, cultural and religious backgrounds.

The Philippines has made progress in its pursuit of sustainable peace, particularly in Muslim Mindanao through an interfaith approach that seeks to build trust and bridge the yawning gap between Filipinos of different faiths.

History

Filipinos have a wealth of experience in interfaith initiatives, dating back to the early efforts to improve understanding between Christians and Muslims at the outset of armed conflict in Mindanao in the 1960s. Our interfaith experience is also broad-based, and involved the participation of civil society organizations and religious leaders. Highlights are the following:

- 1960s – Philippine Constabulary organized the Ecumenical Union of Moral Leaders, which though short-lived, paved the way for a peaceful alternative to the cultural-religious conflicts in Mindanao.
- 1970s – Mindanao-Sulu Pastoral Conference of the Catholic Church, Program Aimed at Christian Education about Muslims (PACEM) of the protestant National Council of Churches of the Philippines.
- 1980s – efforts of missionaries, priests, nuns and laypeople
- 29 November, 1996 – inaugural Bishop-Ulama Conference (BUC) was held shortly after the GRP-MNLF Final Peace Agreement was signed. This high-level interreligious dialogue provided a moral and spiritual dimension to the peace agreement and was considered a milestone in interreligious dialogue. The BUC, which meets thrice a year, is composed of Catholic bishops, Muslim *ulama* and Protestant bishops and pastors.
- Mindanao Week of Peace - BUC, with PHL government and civil society are active participants in the MWP, held yearly since 1994.

Government

CII

At the national level, the PHL government's policy on IFD is reflected in concrete initiatives, such as the formation of the Council for Interfaith Initiatives (CII) in 2008 (formerly the National Committee on Interfaith Cooperation created in 2007). The CII institutionalized the interaction between government and interfaith dialogue advocates within civil society, and in the Philippines' proactive participation in regional and international interfaith initiatives.

The CII was tasked to develop, implement and monitor the National Action Plan on Interfaith Cooperation (2006-2010). The Action Plan, which was crafted in partnership with civil society groups, aims to sustain PHL leadership in the global advocacy for interfaith dialogue; establish, strengthen and institutionalize partnership among government agencies, faith-based organizations and civil society groups involved in interfaith initiatives; and encourage civil society to complement and strengthen the peace building, peacemaking and peacekeeping efforts of government. It has two phases, the first focusing on organizational development and capacity building and the second on actual programs and initiatives.

However, the CII was abolished in 2010. Plans to revitalize the CII under a under the Office of the President (OP) to strengthen the Philippines' interfaith policies in and outside the country are currently under review.

IFD and the Peace Process

The Philippine government pursues IFD as part of the Complementary Track of the Peace Process. The main track or "Track 1" is pursued through "negotiated political settlement of armed conflicts." The Complementary Track, on the other hand, aims to effectively address the causes of armed conflict and other issues that affect the peace process by fostering mutual trust and understanding among different faiths and cultures.

IFD is also a vital in facilitating development work and relief and rehabilitation efforts in conflict areas. Rebuilding communities in a mixed society requires much interaction and cooperation across religious and ethnic divisions, and the success and sustainability of such efforts depend on the commitment of the members of different faith communities to continue working together to rebuild their areas (Sec. Teresita Deles, 6th RID 2012).

Civil Society

The Philippines has a rich network of faith-based groups, grassroots organizations, and other civil society groups, which work with the Philippine Government in fostering a culture of peace, cooperation and development, especially in Southern Philippines. "Initiatives such as workshops, conferences, interfaith prayers, publications, and inter-faith grassroots interaction have helped lessen prejudices, create friendships, and address misunderstandings between Muslims and Christians, between Lumad and Moro, between original inhabitants and settlers (Sec. Teresita Deles, 6th RID 2012).

Education

The academe is also an active advocate of IFD. Schools and universities, as well as “Peace Centers” established by academic institutions and civil society groups, provide venues for interfaith dialogue through hosting local and international conferences and forums. They also create an environment where the youth can cultivate religious and cultural tolerance and appreciation through exposure programs.

In 2004, the Department of Education officially integrated Madrasah Education into the mainstream education in the country. As a result of this initiative, schools with Muslim population offered additional subjects on Arabic Language and Islamic Values Education.

II. PHL Interfaith Initiatives at the United Nations

Encouraged by our success at the national level, we have been particularly active in pushing for the IFD agenda at the United Nations. After the 9/11 attacks in 2001, former President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo highlighted the need to enhance IFD to prevent the outbreak of religious wars.

- In 2003, the PHL mission to the United Nations in New York introduced a draft resolution during the 58th Session of the General Assembly calling for the creation of an interreligious council or special committee to help address the problem of conflict resolution, reconciliation and achievement of justice and the rule of law.
- On 26 October 2004, almost exactly 11 years ago, the Philippines pioneered an unprecedented UNGA resolution “Promotion of Cooperation among Religions,” which calls for the adoption of IRD for peace. It was adopted as Resolution 59/23 at the 59th Session of the UNGA on 11 November 2004. It is considered as one of our country’s most important initiatives at the UN. It is also a landmark initiative in the UN because it opened the doors to a partnership with the civil society and religious sector, highlighting the vital role of religion in the UN’s efforts to seek world peace. It was principally sponsored by the Philippines and co-sponsored by 24 other countries. Basically, the Resolution:
 - Affirmed mutual understanding and IRD as constituting important dimensions of the dialogue among civilizations and the culture of peace;
 - Took note of UNESCO’s work on IRD and encourages other relevant UN bodies to work closely with UNESCO and coordinate their efforts;

- Called on the Secretary General to bring the promotion of IRD to the attention of all governments and international organizations.
- Since then, the UNGA has adopted interfaith resolutions yearly, with the Philippines as a sponsor or co-sponsor. The latest resolution was GA Resolution 69/140 on the “Promotion of Interreligious and Intercultural Dialogue, Understanding and Cooperation for Peace,” adopted by UNGA’s 69th session on 15 December 2014. The Philippines and Pakistan are the main sponsors, co-sponsored by 32 other countries. In summary, Resolution 69/140:
 - Reaffirmed elements of the original PHL resolution on mutual understanding and IRD as important dimensions of the dialogue among civilizations and the culture of peace, as well as UNESCO’s work on IRD;
 - Recognized the importance of IRD and its valuable contribution in promoting social cohesion, peace and development, and called on Member States to consider IRD as an important tool in achieving peace, social stability and the full realization of internationally agreed development goals;
 - Condemned any advocacy of religious hatred that incites discrimination, hostility or violence; and
 - Underlined the importance of moderation as a value within societies for countering extremism and contributing to the promotion of IRD, tolerance, understanding and cooperation.
- For the first time, interfaith matters were brought to the attention of the UN Security Council in September 2005, when the Philippines spearheaded the adoption of the UN Security Council Resolution 1624, calling all states to continue international efforts to enhance dialogue and broaden understanding among civilizations.

Apart from promoting the interfaith agenda through the consistent sponsorship of UN Resolutions, the PHL has championed IRD initiatives within the UN system through:

- On 22 June 2005, the Philippines launched the first “Conference on Interfaith Cooperation for Peace” at the UN in New York, which sought to promote dialogue among governments, faith-based organizations and civil society, and the UN system in achieving international peace and security. This is also in response to the call of world leaders during the 2000 Millennium Summit to engage civil society to contribute to the realization of the

Millennium Declaration, particularly the maintenance of international peace and security.

- This was followed by the first “Informal Summit of World Leaders on Interfaith Dialogue and Cooperation for Peace” in New York on 13 September 2005, which was chaired by the Philippines. 15 leaders signed an outcome document that emphasized the importance of IFD and cooperation as an important contribution to building peace and preventing conflict.
- On 24 March 2006, we launched the “Tripartite Forum on Interfaith Cooperation for Peace,” which brought together 49 governments, 6 UN agencies and religious NGOs;
- We have been active participants in the annual Ministerial Meetings on Interfaith Dialogue and Cooperation for Peace (MMIDCP) from 2006 to 2009.

III. PHL Interfaith Initiatives in other Forums

The Philippines has been at the forefront of advancing the advocacy for IFD in international and regional forums, such as the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), Group of 77, Asia Europe Meeting (ASEM), Asian Regional Forum, Asia Pacific Forum, and the Asia-Pacific Regional Interfaith Dialogue Conference (RID).

A. NAM

At the 14th NAM Summit in Havana in September 2006, the Philippines conveyed its desire to host a Special Ministerial Meeting on Interfaith Dialogue as its contribution to promoting peace and development.

Some 449 delegates converged in Manila on 17-18 March 2010 for the Philippines’ hosting of the Special Non-Aligned Movement Ministerial Meeting on Interfaith Dialogue and Cooperation for Peace and Development (SNAMM). The SNAMM produced the Manila Declaration which identifies and reaffirms the key principles crucial to achieve peace and development through IFD, anchored on the core values of mutual understanding, respect and tolerance. .

B. ASEM

The Philippines was one of 11 co-sponsors of the Asia-Europe Meetings (ASEM) on Interfaith Dialogue since 2005. The Philippines hosted the 7th ASEM Interfaith Dialogue on Migration on 13-14 October 2011.

C. RID

The Philippines has co-sponsored (with Australia and Indonesia) the Asia-Pacific Regional Interfaith Dialogues (RID) since 2004 (Yogyakarta). This Dialogue has established itself as an important platform in promoting awareness, tolerance and understanding among different faiths and cultures in the Asia-Pacific region. The latest one is the 6th RID held in Semarang, Indonesia on 11-15 March 2012.

This brings me to the end of my presentation. I wish to thank the organizers of this Forum for giving us the opportunity to share the Philippines' interfaith experience. We fully believe that interfaith dialogue is a vital tool to promote understanding, tolerance and respect among people divided by differences in cultures and faiths, and ultimately, help build bridges of peace and cooperation among all people.

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