

THE GLOBAL RELIGIOUS FORUM CONSULTATION- SRI LANKA

“The Role of Religion in Humanitarian Action”

At 9:00 am to 4:30 pm

On 26th of February 2016



The Global Religious Forum Consultation- Sri Lanka

“The Role of Religion in Humanitarian Action”

We, a group of leaders representing four major religions namely Buddhism, Islam, Christianity and Hinduism as practiced in Sri Lanka assembled on 26th January 2016 to engage in a consultation jointly sponsored by three faith based humanitarian organizations working in the country (Sarvodaya, Muslim Aid and World Vision). We assembled to contribute our reflections to the emerging agenda for the “WHS Special Event on Religion and Humanitarian Action” to be held during the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit (WHS) in Istanbul, Turkey.

Having experienced multi-faceted humanitarian crises in our country as consequence of a prolonged civil war and number of natural disasters including the 2004 tsunami, we are mindful of the challenges and shortcomings that arose and, when situation demands, can unite in solidarity in responding to future humanitarian crises. We therefore welcome the WHS as an intent from the United Nations to reflect on humanitarian actions and renew operational mechanisms to make them more effective, inclusive and global. In the face of increasing disasters across the globe and demand for humanitarian assistance with shrinking resources to meet those demands, we recognize the urgency of such reflection.

As faith leaders, we are also aware of the unique position that we, and the institutions we represent can play in responding to humanitarian crises. Our experience facing disasters in the past in Sri Lanka have convinced us that participation of religious leaders in humanitarian action made a difference in the services rendered by various Humanitarian agencies in Sri Lanka as publicly endorsed also by the three agencies that sponsored this consultation

In this regard, we wish to draw the attention of policy makers at all levels to address emerging humanitarian crises to recognize that:-

- Disasters test human spirit and also results in suffering that transcends physical wounds and material losses;
- Material compensation alone cannot assure complete recovery from disasters until the victims are emotionally re-integrated into the society through a spiritually healing medium common to all precepts of the global faiths such as compassion, mercy, forgiveness and reconciliation ;

- In religiously conscious countries like Sri Lanka, religious leaders have a significant role during and after a tragedy to support recovery and reconstruction by working with victims to restart life with hope and dignity and such comforting assurance should become one among the main goals of humanitarian actions.
- Religious leaders work very closely in contact with the people and therefore can be of value after a crisis in needs assessment and delivery of immediate and post-disaster humanitarian assistance to the victims in addition to preparing people for future emergencies.
- Differences in religious beliefs and practices is a key factor that instigates intolerance and hatred among different faith groups which at times easily escalate up to a level of riots and physical violence. In such a context, respected and renowned faith leaders can shoulder the vital responsibility of pacifying their aggravated religious groups.

We wish to urge policy makers, at the World Humanitarian Summit to pledge the following commitments for future humanitarian actions:-

- As part of a localizing agenda, the involvement of religious leaders should be made a desirable requirement in any future humanitarian actions (especially in countries which have a high percentage of faith communities)
- Encourage and facilitate interfaith dialogue and partnerships with religious leaders as a measure to ensure appropriateness and accountability of humanitarian actions in any target locality for such actions
- Support and recognize voluntary formation of multi-faith committees at different administrative levels (as a voice of conscience) particularly in raising levels of mitigation and preparedness against any future humanitarian crises.
- Provide support in establishing National level interfaith institutions through which all those independent community level voluntary formations can be networked and connected to each other.
- Encourage religious leaders to incorporate concepts such as co-existence and resilience into their regular sermons and religious teachings.