

SPEECH

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Speaking Notes: Interfaith Dialogue for Harmony and Peace

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Introduction

Our generous host, Your Excellency Prime Minister Hun Sen, delegation leaders, and delegation members...

First, I would like to thank Cambodia for hosting the dialogue

This is the first time (since the Dialogue was co-founded by Australia and Indonesia in 2004) that it has been held in a Buddhist country.

The Australian Government believes that interfaith dialogue is a profoundly important process for harmony and peace - vital to building a critical mass of voices that rejects violence and respects human dignity.

Australia is doing its bit: promoting religious and cultural diversity

Australia is a secular nation, one in which there is dynamic religious and cultural diversity. [2006 Census data shows...]

Half of all Australians are born overseas or have at least one parent born overseas, from some 200 countries

While the majority are Christians [63.9%], 2 in 5 Australians do not describe themselves as Christian. Buddhism is the next largest religion [2.1%], then Islam [1.7%]

But Hinduism is the fastest-growing religion: the number of its adherents grew by 55% between 2001 and 2006; followed by Islam [21%] and Buddhism [17%]

So, in Australia, religious diversity is thriving; and this is supported by Government, especially in the education sphere.

And there is unity in the diversity. In my international development portfolio, for example, Australians feel, regardless of their religious affiliation, a strong sense of moral obligation that Australia should help and work with others around the world.

An ethos of multiculturalism in Australia supports the effective settlement of new Australians and broader social harmony.

Since 2003, this has been fostered by almost 390 'Living in Harmony' community interfaith projects. [\$1.5 million grant scheme per annum]

These government grants build bridges between faith communities across Australia. In my Canberra electorate, for example, communities are being brought together through visit programs, forums, presentations and exhibitions. And in my birth-place of Perth, through workshops, sport, cooking, art, music, performance, volunteering programs and dialogue.

We are also continuing to promote interfaith harmony in the Asia-Pacific region:

Australia and the European Union hosted a Regional Youth Interfaith Forum in December 2007 for youth from twelve countries. And it proved to be a useful adjunct to this Dialogue.

We have held regular exchanges between Australian Muslim leaders and their counterparts in Indonesia, the Philippines and southern Thailand

And Australia has supported some 30 grassroots interfaith activities in the Philippines, including in the media and education sectors.

Just as we assist new Australians, so too, we reach out to the first Australians. The new Government recently apologised formally for the past mistreatment of Australia's indigenous people in our country. For the breaking up of families and communities as late as in the 1970s, we said 'sorry'

It was a healing moment. By acknowledging the past, we laid claim to a future that embraced all Australians.

Values to live by: the role of community leaders

All great religions of the world share common perspective on respecting human dignity, on what is right and wrong, and what is fair and just

Values determine how we and future generations live. So you (delegates), as community leaders who help define our crucial values, have a key role to play

It is important to speak up for shared values and common objectives (such as the global pursuit of security and progress). And we all should highlight and promote examples of interfaith harmony.

Governments can and should only do so much. Success or failure rests with community leaders.

All aspects of the dialogue are important

It is critical that faith communities are ready to speak to one another at the grassroots level. People at the grassroots level first must understand how their own faith promotes acceptance and love for their fellow man, no matter what their religion. And they need to be encouraged to be open to other faiths

Interfaith dialogue in grassroots areas where it is most needed is not easy. Religious and community leaders must prepare the path. You have a vital role to play.

So what's important here is widening the dialogue beyond the interfaith experts to broader lay communities of both practising and non-practising people.

Peace education vital

Australia was pleased to accept the lead in this Dialogue on discussions on the role of education. We believe the mainstreaming of interfaith principles into education systems - religious and secular; formal and informal - is central to sustained generational change

Griffith University's Multi-Faith Centre is one of the leading institutions in this field in Australia and the region.

Conclusion

So my message today is to encourage you, as delegates, to reach out into your communities at the grassroots level to advocate the importance of appreciating diversity, resolving conflicts without violence, and minimising disconnection, marginalisation and helplessness.

Interfaith dialogue, I believe, is a fundamentally important way of building human dignity and security.

Thank you for this opportunity to share the Australian Government's views, and I wish you well.