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**SUMMARY REPORT: THE UNITED AFRICAN CONGRESS, GIVE THEM A HAND FOUNDATION AND THEIR PARTNERS OBSERVE “WORLD INTERFAITH HARMONY WEEK” AT THE UNITED NATIONS ON FEBRUARY 4, 2016**

The World Interfaith Harmony Week (WIHW) was observed with an Interfaith Forum held in the ECOSOC chamber of the United Nations on Feb 4, 2016, organized for the 4th year in a row by the United African Congress and Give Them a Hand Foundation with their partners Nusantara Foundation, Buddha’s Light International Association and the International Association of Applied Psychology. The event was jointly sponsored by three United Nations member states, namely, the Permanent Missions to the United Nations of Ethiopia, Indonesia, and Jamaica.

The theme of our forum this year, **BUILDING BRIDGES ACROSS BOUNDARIES** was conceived by the organizers to underscore three pillars, namely, the pursuit of interfaith harmony to achieve a lasting peace, and its interconnectedness to the 2030 UN Agenda for Sustainable Development Goals, as well as to the achievement of global health and recovery from emergencies such as the recent Ebola pandemic.

**THE THEME**

In a world beleaguered by internecine wars, terrorism, poverty, disaffected and troubled youth, alarming global health emergencies, and dangers of climate change, as well as a record number of refugees and internally displaced peoples, the need for collaborative understanding and cooperation in seeking peaceful solutions to common problems has never been greater.

Amidst despair and alienation among the world’s poor, some demagogues have emerged to distort the teachings of their religion to achieve their political agenda by pitting one group against the other. We believe peace and harmony can be achieved block by block, with the efforts of neighbors, communities, and societies, by extending a hand of friendship and human solidarity across the divide. Understanding, recognizing, and appreciating the humanity of “the other” is an essential step.

Our plans specifically address many of the goals in the newly adopted UN 2030 Agenda for sustainable development. Namely, with regard to the goal about health and well-being, our goals include to build rural multi-disciplinary health centers in the three Ebola-stricken countries in West Africa, and to specifically address the plight of survivors and orphans in the wake of the Ebola epidemic.

The interconnectedness of the three pillars of our initiatives, namely, (1) the promotion of a lasting interfaith harmony and understanding, (2) the achievement of the UN Sustainable Development Goals, and (3) continued awareness and assistance in the recovery from the Ebola epidemic, are evident in our own work and efforts of others in the global community. Therefore, the theme of our presentation in this year’s observance of WIHW was determined to be **”Building Bridges Across Boundaries”** referring to bridges across boundaries that transcend geography, politics, economic and social status, race, ethnicity and religion. We must all be concerned about this three-pronged approach as we are all together in this increasingly fragile planet of ours.

**PARTICIPANTS**

Among the many VIPs who spoke at our WIHW event were the Permanent Observer of the African Union Mission to the UN, the Permanent Representatives of the Missions of Benin, Palau and Gambia to the UN, and the Ambassador of São Tomé and Príncipe. The permanent missions of France and Denmark to the UN also sent representatives. Members of various religious organizations, prominent leaders representing NGOs and civil society, and health care professionals, were among more than 500 invited guests who filled the chamber to capacity.

Leaders from the Christian, Muslim, Hindu, Jewish, and Buddhist faiths made presentations, and participated in a panel discussion with audience questions. These include Imam Shamsi Ali, President of the Nusantara Foundation; Rabbi Dr. Alvin Kass, Chief Chaplain of the New York Police Department; Reverend Dionne P. Boisierre, Chaplain of the Church Center of the United Nations; Dr. Uma Mysorekar, President of the Hindu Temple Society of North America; Abbess Venerable Youwang, President of the Buddha’s Light International Association; Ceremonial Ritualist Ka’nahsohon Kevin Deer of the Mohawk Nation (Five Nation Iroquois Confederacy); and Rabbi Jill Hausman of the Actors’ Temple.

The keynote speaker was H.E. Assistant Secretary-General of the United Nations Mr. Thomas Gass.

The moderator of the panel discussion was Mr. Milton Alimadi, publisher of Black Star News.

Mr. Gordon Tapper, Founder and Chairman of Give Them a Hand Foundation, serving as the MC of the first segment of the proceedings, called the proceedings to order at 3:15 PM and invited Dr. Mohammed Nurhussein, National Chairman of the United African Congress to make welcoming remarks on behalf of the organizers.

In his statement, Dr. Nurhussein touched on the worldwide turmoil, the plight of refugees, income disparities, gender equality, climate change, and rights of children. “Love for one another and embracing our diversity is what should define us as human beings and not the carnage we see around us.” He concluded his remarks by imploring faith leaders to deploy their moral authority to make the goals of the 2030 agenda for sustainable development attainable, and to mitigate the devastation caused by health emergencies such as the Ebola pandemic through global action and solidarity by way of interfaith action to promote understanding, peace and harmony among communities everywhere.

**Statements of the Permanent Representatives of the Sponsoring Missions to the UN**

The Chargé d’affaires of the Mission of Jamaica to the UN, H. E. Mr. Curt Davis expressed his country’s pleasure in cosponsoring this interfaith forum and reassured the conveners of the support and commitment of the Mission of Jamaica to this worthwhile effort. In keeping with the theme, he pointed out that “peace and harmony were indispensable to achieving the SDGs and faith can be a positive tool for social change.”

The Chargé d’affaires of the Permanent Mission of Ethiopia to the UN, H.E. Mr. Dawit Yirga Wodegerima, noted that Ethiopia, as the primary sponsor for the last four years, is committed to supporting this interfaith harmony event. He alluded to his country’s diversity in languages, ethnicities and religions and expressed the view that for “a country like Ethiopia, interfaith harmony is not a matter of choice but necessity." He went on to say that The National Interfaith Council established by the government is aimed at promoting and sustaining an environment of mutual understanding, peace and harmony among its diverse population.

The Deputy Permanent Representative of the Permanent Mission of Indonesia to the United Nations, HE. Mr. Muhammad Anshor, expressed the continued support and commitment of the mission of Indonesia as a cosponsor. He underscored in his speech the value of solidarity among peoples of different faiths seeking solutions to common challenges together. He also addressed the three issues expressed in our theme when he said that the connection between the three is "natural and inevitable."

Our keynote speaker, H.E. Mr. Thomas Gass, Assistant Secretary-General of the United Nations, delivered an impassioned speech about the UN 2030 Agenda for sustainable development. Addressing the three pillars of our theme, he emphasized their interconnectedness and said, “This declaration of interdependence can and must become a common cause and a rallying point among religions.” The audience listened with rapt attention. He continued to say that the 2030 Agenda is a “shared vision of humanity” and that the approach is “transformative and integrative.” He was widely applauded.

**Opening Statements by the Faith Leaders**

The interfaith dialogue began with a statement from Rabbi Alvin Kass, Chief Chaplain of the New York City Police Department (NYPD). In his statement, Rabbi Kass made an analogy of the NYPD as a microcosm of New York City and in the larger context of the United Nations in the diversity of the department comprising people of all cultures, religions and languages. Despite all their differences, he said members of NYPD live and work harmoniously and depend on each other for help. He also exhorted us to work hard as human beings to help one another, citing the teaching of the Jewish religious scholar Solomon Schechter to “leave a little to God,” meaning that it is up to us as human beings to do the heavy lifting in working for the common good serving humanity.

Imam Shamsi Ali, the founder and president of Nusantara Foundation and one of the co-sponsors of the program, noted the good news that “religions are coming back to play important role in our public lives”’ He also told us to be “humble and to acknowledge that we are not perfect” and that we need to help each other, namely, to “share and care.” He alluded to our interconnectedness and added that we have only one choice and that is to work together. He cautioned against blaming one religion for the problems of the world, as the reading of history indicates that none of us is blameless. He went on to say that religions in general are harmonious. What is happening is that religion has been hijacked for one reason only: greed, specifically, greed for power. He said that Islam is a religion of peace, embracing every human being of all backgrounds. It was a message that was well received by the audience.

Dr. Uma Mysorekar in her statement emphasized the need for renouncing force of any kind to resolve conflicts and to use instead the "power of the dialogue.” She also made the point that "Making all religions the same is a denial of pluralism and breeds another form of intolerance" and that we need to embrace our diversity. Dr. Mysorekar’s comments renouncing “force of any kind” and calling on us to embrace our diversity was on target.

Reverend Dionne Boissiere, Chaplain of the Church Center of the UN spoke of our shared humanity and that we need to respect each other and renounce “othering the other” which is born out of fear of the unknown, the stranger, the other. This was a timely and relevant reminder of our common humanity during these trying times for the millions of refugees around the world seeking safe haven.

The Venerable Youwang of Buddha’s Light International Association, also one of the event sponsors, said that “as persons of faith we are gathering here to speak with one voice, one heart and one purpose coming across the globe to communicate across our own borders.” She went on to say the “SDGs provide an opportunity for doing what we do, develop a coordinated plan to relieve at least a portion of the suffering in the World.”

Rabbi Jill Housman of the Actor’s Temple drove home the point that understanding and respecting each other and cooperating with each other for the common good is what her teaching tells her. “Not ‘us’ or ‘them.’ but see the 'other' as ‘ourselves’" was a potent message of love, inclusiveness and hope for humanity.

Ka’nahasohon Kevin Deer, the ceremonial ritualist from the Mohawk Nation of the Mohawk Longhouse Trail (Iroquois) from Canada, offered a profound message of the Mohawk beliefs when he explained through song, dance and narration about the natural balance of nature that has been disrupted because of greed. "As long as the sun shines, the grass grows and the river flows, the Mother Earth will continue to provide us with all we need and the natural balance will be maintained." His message struck a responsive chord in the audience.

The faith leaders then participated in a panel to answer questions from the audience in a Q&A session. The exchanges were lively, enlightening and respectful of each other. Judging by the enthusiasm and very positive feedback, the interfaith program was a resounding success.

To address the Ebola element of our theme, Dr. Judy Kuriansky, the main United Nations NGO representative of our event partner, the International Association of Applied Psychology, distributed copies of materials and a video she produced about a recent mission to the Ebola-affected country of Sierra Leone, and what is being done to address the psychosocial needs of the people.

Hon. Sidique Wai, president of United African Congress brought the proceedings to a close by thanking all the participants and the audience.

**LOOKING AHEAD**

The organizers have always felt that interfaith dialogue is meaningless unless translated into action that would cement the common bond among the various faiths rooted in their shared humanity. One such action was the coming together of all participating faith communities in 2013 soon after the destructive hurricane Sandy struck parts of New York City and New Jersey. In response to our call, faith leaders of the Muslim, Buddhist, Jewish and Christian communities mobilized hundreds of volunteers to help clean up rubble of many homes that were destroyed or damaged, and delivered food to stranded survivors. It was a heartwarming experience to see human solidarity in action and interfaith harmony at its best.

“Building Bridges Across Boundaries,” as expressed in the theme of our partnership, is an ongoing project and will not be limited to an annual one-day interfaith program but rather to a continuous effort and commitment by all of the participants with programs and actions to enhance the promotion of interfaith harmony as envisioned by the UNGA Resolution A/65/PV.34.

The organizers are in preliminary talks with each of the faith leaders with the aim of holding interfaith programs/projects in their churches, mosques, synagogues and temples to which communities of the other faiths would be invited to participate, thus making the interfaith harmony and understanding a yearlong pursuit towards the two commandments that guide the WIHW, namely “Love of God, Love of the Neighbor” or “Love of the Good, Love of the Neighbor”.

Submitted by:

Dr. Mohammed A. Nurhussein, National Chairman, United African Congress

Mr. Gordon Tapper, Founder and Chairman, Give Them a Hand Foundation

Hon. Sidique Wai, President and chief spokesperson, United African Congress

Dr. Judy Kuriansky, Main UN NGO representative, International Association of Applied Psychology

Imam Shamsi Ali, Founder and President, Nusantara Foundation

Venerable Youwang Shih, Buddha’s Light International Association