

A M A N A

Volume 5 Issue 1, April 2011



Who is a progressive Muslim?

Regional peace issues and citizens initiative

Youth Vision and Actions for Peace

Fostering inter and intra-faith understanding

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Amana Media Initiative

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Editorial

At this point in history, we have been witnessing divisiveness and mistrust in society at all levels. Ever-increasing gaps between poor and rich, rural and urban, periphery and center, majority and minority, extremists and liberals, and South and North pave the way for violence and wars. Millions of people are affected by economic globalization, poverty, protracted conflict, terrorist acts, the arms race and war. The Nation State is failing its own people through corruption, incompetence, unjust governance, unequal distribution of wealth, and indifference towards the plight of trafficked women, children, minorities, migrants, refugees and people living with HIV/AIDS. The problems and challenges are enormous in this multicultural and diverse world. This issue of AMANA provides insights from the Conference on the theme of Multiculturalism and Global Peace.

To address these concerns, from January 26 to 28, 2011 AMAN network members, representatives of partner organizations and invited guests came together on the occasion of AMAN's 20th Anniversary and 4th Assembly to look back on what AMAN has achieved and to assess the strengths and weaknesses of AMAN. Back to back with the Assembly, AMAN organized an International Conference on "Multiculturalism and Global Peace."

The venue of the Conference was Pattani. Southern Thailand has been experiencing protracted conflict and violence since 2004, resulting in loss of lives and setbacks to development. Nevertheless, local communities, NGOs, government institutes, scholars and some international organizations have been engaged in various forms of activities to reduce violence and promote peace and development. In the historic city of Pattani, the Conference provided an opportunity for both the local and international participants, academics and activists to interact, learn from each other and find ways to promote peace and enhance multi-faith bilateral and multilateral cooperation and solidarity. This issue of AMANA provides, insights into the conflict in Southern Thailand and the peace process there, as well as elsewhere in Asia.

The Assembly took place after a year-long process of evaluation of the first 20 years of the existence of AMAN. The evaluation was primarily undertaken through a process of participatory self-reflection on the part of AMAN. In light of the evaluation two key questions were addressed by the Assembly. How can the AMAN network be strengthened in responding to future challenges in serving the greater Ummah? How can AMAN forge further interfaith and intra-faith cooperation towards global peace? This issue of AMANA also provides information about the future course charted by the Assembly in response those two key questions.

The AMAN Assembly applauded the current surge of uprisings of the people, seeking change, in the predominantly Muslim nations, in the Arab and the North African regions. An article, Springtime of Revolutions, in this issue of AMANA, provides insights into these struggles for just and participatory governance. AMAN believes that the best solution to the crisis will emerge from within, from the people themselves within these nations.

This editorial provides some personal reflections by the Secretary-General of AMAN, to put into historical perspective the above-mentioned content of this Anniversary issue of AMAN. AMAN came into existence in the late 80's out of the realization that in Asia, though the Muslim population is large in number, there was no forum where Muslim scholars, philanthropists and social workers could come together and share experiences, ideas and express common concerns.

Given the pluralistic, multi-religious and multicultural reality of the World, interfaith, intercultural, and inter-ethnic understanding and cooperation have been an integral part of AMAN's activities. Services and solidarity with vulnerable communities, such as people affected by natural disaster, affected by HIV and AIDS, stateless people, refugees and asylum seekers has been another area of engagement for AMAN and its members.

AMAN is a network of progressive Muslims in Asia, seeking to respond in a small way, to the numerous challenges that the people in the region are facing: ranging from mass poverty, elite corruption, materialistic life style, increasing ethnic, religious and communal conflict, violence against women and children and environmental degradation.

Since Islam embodies eternal values and principles of Truth, Justice, Compassion, Freedom and Equality, it is only right that Muslims seek guidance from their religion in order to meet the challenges of the times. At the same time AMAN seeks active collaboration with other faith communities in order to promote human dignity and social justice.

AMAN has survived and sustained its efforts over the last 20 years, and this is a success in itself. The challenge for AMAN, as it faces the future, is to ensure that AMAN remains a relevant, effective and meaningful network, not only for its own sake, but to serve and empower people in their quest for peace, justice and human dignity.



M. Abdus Sabur is Secretary General of AMAN and the Asian Resource Foundation

AMAN's 20th Anniversary Assembly was held in Pattani, South Thailand, after several months of planning and following an extensive evaluation exercise involving a year-long process. Originally planned for November 2010, the Assembly was held on 26 – 28 January 2011 since floods in South Thailand and the disruption that followed, forced a postponement.

Some two hundred and fifteen participants came together from twenty countries, including AMAN delegates and Council members, program participants, invited scholars, researchers, representatives of partner organizations, southern community members, civil society organizations and members of the secretariat. A few representatives from print and electronic media covered the event. The Assembly adopted a statement which was circulated widely.

The AMAN evaluation consisted of national consultations, interviews, written submissions, reviews of publications and reports, as well as meetings with the secretariat and program team. The Report of the AMAN evaluation provided the basis for discussions in the Assembly on future organizational development of AMAN. The main lessons learned from the evaluation were concretized in a Council meeting held just before the Assembly. This enabled the larger gathering of Assembly to discuss and adopt recommendations regarding the future of AMAN.

Anniversary Assembly

Local leadership

The Assembly was held in South Thailand to express solidarity with people of the area, whose peaceful lives have been severely affected since 2004 due to strife and violence. A series of planning meetings were held in Pattani with the College of Islamic Studies, Prince of Songkhla University, local NGOs and civil society organizations including youth, women and community in general. The teams involved in these discussions maintained a close rapport with local government bodies. This process ensured that the Assembly was not only an event, held at a particular location, but its purpose and objective was to bring various sectors of public life on board, together.

The Assembly plenary sessions

The Assembly deliberations took place in as many as seven plenary sessions as well as several thematic workshops. Proceedings started with an opening plenary on 26th January which was chaired by Dr. Asghar Ali Engineer, Chairman of AMAN. Dr. Yusuf Talek, Director of the College of Islamic Studies, welcomed all the delegates and briefed them about the College. Mr. Nipon Narapitakul, Governor of Pattani and Mr. Panu Uthairat the Head of SBPAC (The Southern Border Province Administrative Centre) explained the Thai government policy and program in the South towards restoring peace and sustainable development. Dr. Srisompop Jitpiromsri, the Director of CSCD (Center for the Study of Conflict and Cultural Diversity) gave a vote of thanks on behalf of the local organizing committee.

Plenary I: Multiculturalism and Global Peace

This session was chaired by Dr. Fuad Jabali, Deputy Director of Islamic State University Jakarta. Dr. Mark Tamthai, Director of IRCP, Payap, stated that conceptually, institutionally and operationally, multiculturalism provides both principles and mechanisms for building peace in diverse, divided and conflict-ridden societies. While federalism provides the guidelines for democratic and participatory governance based on the principle of self rule and shared rule; multiculturalism is the constitutive element of federalism to facilitate peaceful cohabitation in multicultural and plural societies. There are many examples of conflict resolution and peace building in various countries of the world, where the partnership of communities has nurtured unity in diversity. A multicultural society characterizes diversity and encourages harmony between different cultures. Multiculturalism acknowledges the existence of diverse communities; it cherishes and promotes cultural diversity and pluralism. Multiculturalism creates a society in which different communities forge a common identity while retaining their respective cultures and identities. Multiculturalism thus also represents a new kind of universalism where the people are included in the nation state not only as a member of diverse ethnic groups, but also with equal rights and duties.



charts the future

Workshops and Forums around the Assembly

Prior consultations and planning meetings made it possible to hold the following workshops and forums during the Assembly:

- Young Asian Muslim Women Leadership Training Workshop,
- Southern Peoples Forum,
- Violence against Women,
- Role of Women in Peace Building in Conflict Areas,
- Youth Vision for Peace,
- Faith Communities Responding to Needs of Vulnerable Communities: Migrants, Refugees, Asylum Seekers and HIV Positives,
- Peace Processes in Aceh, Mindanao, Manipur and Kashmir, Nepal, and Afghanistan,
- The State of Peace Studies and Peace Education in Asia,
- Relevance of Islamic Economy to Eradication of Poverty,
- The State of Islamic Education in Asia.

Plenary II: Intrafaith and Interfaith Dialogue and Cooperation for Peace

This plenary was chaired by Dr. Alyessa Bagian Abdulkarim, Western Mindanao State University, and addressed by Dr. Chandra Muzaffar, University of Sains, Penang, Malaysia, Dr. John Butt, IRCP, Payap University, Dr. Arshi Khan, Aligarh Muslim University and Dr. Iqbal Khalil, representative of Al-Khidmat, Pakistan. Intra-faith conflict arises because of narrow, bigoted dogma regarding the 3 “Ts”: text, teaching and tradition. Such conflict can be minimized through promoting dialogue, developing a better understanding and disseminating such understanding. The need to minimize violence stems from the fact that we have all become so interdependent as is evident from the 5 global crises relating to economy, environment, food, energy and water.

Islam as a philosophy emphasises one human family and the oneness of humankind. Diversity is to be celebrated. We must recognize our common human dignity. Ultimately, we are judged on the basis of our righteous conduct and our good deeds.

Interfaith violent conflict has, historically been a product of occupation, conquest and the imposition of sovereignty. The issue of rights in conflict is the main cause of violence. The challenges stem from differences: in values, precept, practice, perception. They stem from different understandings of the role of religion in life and society. They stem from differences in understanding as to what it means to profess, practice and propagate ones religion.

The challenges are both internal and external in nature. Internally the challenges relate to our own unease and discomfort, resulting in misunderstanding, suspicion, distrust and disbelief which generate disrespect, disgust, contempt and ultimately hatred. Externally, the challenges stem from practices of intolerance, discrimination and exclusion, misleading manipulation, and the mobilization of frenzy and fear. This results in banning, persecution, and expulsion (euphemistically called “cleansing”). At the heart of the problem are policies and practices that privilege one religion over others resulting in discrimination and ultimately, denial of identity. Interfaith cooperation begins with dialogue to remove misunderstandings and deepen understanding and then moves on to interfaith cooperation in confidence-building measures and constructive engagement activities.

Plenary III: Update on Regional Peace Issues

This session was chaired by Dr. Azyumardi Azra, the Director of Graduate School, UIN, Jakarta. The panelists included Mr. Shinichi Noguchi who spoke on North Asian peace issues particularly relating to the US Military base in Okinawa and Korea, nuclear armament and the importance of Article 9 of the Japanese constitution. South Asian issues were addressed by Shafqat Munir, Zahra tul Fatima detailing the complex protracted conflict in Pakistan and Dr. Khatiera highlighted the problems and prospects for peace in Afghanistan; Mushtaqul Haq Sikandar provided the historical background of the conflict and gross violations of human rights in Kashmir, India and Erkin Kamalov presented his readings on ethnic conflict in Kirgizstan.

Plenary IV: Experiences on Peace Making and Peace Building

This plenary was chaired by Mr. Sameer Dossani, representative of Action Aid. The panelists included Dr. Jacquelyn Chagnon of American Friends Service Committee who discussed their efforts in strengthening the role of women in peacebuilding. Fatima Rasul from the Philippines shared experiences of civil society and military cooperation and Dr. Srisompop Jitpiromsri highlighted decentralization of governance as an approach to peacebuilding in Southern Thailand. Kuldeep Niraula from Nepal analyzed the factors behind the stalemate of the peace process in Nepal.



Plenary V: Women in Conflict Zones

Ms. Kiran Bhatia from UNFPA moderated the session. Among speakers, Ms. Vahida Nainar gave an overview of violence against women and responses from women's organization and networks. Ms. Rubiyanti Kholifah shared experiences of women's initiatives in community based peacebuilding and Ms. Uzma Mehboob from Pakistan highlighted the plight of women in North-Western Waziristan, Pakistan's borderline with Afghanistan.

Plenary VI: The Quest for Progressive Muslim Identity and Strategies for Peace

Dr. Chaiwat Satha-Anand, from Thammasat University chaired this session. Dr. Asghar Ali Engineer introduced the topic and explained the core elements of progressive identity. Progressive identity is symbolized by the struggle for justice, challenging the oppressive state structure (the state would consider this act as subversive) and struggles for equality and human dignity. From this perspective interfaith cooperation becomes very important. A single religious community would find it difficult to establish a just society alone. Dr. Chaiwat pointed out that the multiple identity an individual carries, creates a complex set of multiple relationships which most people find difficult to tackle. In many cases, the state operates from a majority chauvinistic bias.

Concluding plenary:

Mohammad Abdus Sabur, Secretary General of AMAN, opened the session to receive feedback, impressions and comments – particularly from youth participants. In this session, the Assembly Statement was read, discussed and adopted. On behalf of the AMAN Council, the Secretary General expressed AMAN's commitment to follow-up the important recommendations that had come from the workshops and plenary sessions, including the concerns expressed by women's groups in the Southern peoples forum.



To mark the occasion AMAN recognized the following individuals and organizations for their significant contributions to peace; they were awarded with a trophy under the following categories:

Youth

1. Mr. Tilottam Poudel – President JCYCN (Jagriti Child and Youth Concern Nepal), Nepal
2. Mr Aathif Eibn'Alaawy Shukour- former Secretary General of the Student Federation of Thailand, Nar-athiwat, Thailand

Faith based organizations

1. Mr. Shinichi Noguchi – General Secretary, Niwano Peace Foundation, Japan
2. Fr. Thomas Michel – former Coordinator of the Inter-Religious Desk of the Vatican

Peace and Human Rights

1. Kontras, Indonesia
2. Odhikar, Bangladesh

Islamic education

1. College of Islamic Studies, Prince of Songkhla University, Pattani
2. Yala Islamic University, Yala

Peace Research

1. Center for the Study of Conflict and Cultural Diversity

Statement from the AMAN 20th Anniversary Assembly, Pattani

We the AMAN* Anniversary Assembly of 2011, firmly believe that the diversity of the cultures on Earth today is our strength, which should be nurtured and protected. Diversity gives us identity and the means to know, respect and celebrate each other, living together in peace.

We are convinced that peace amidst diversity is achievable. But, in a rapidly globalising world, we are also convinced that to make Peace achievable we must:

1. Recognize and respect human dignity
2. Acknowledge and celebrate diversity
3. Respect the opinions of all without prejudice
4. Respect protect and fulfill the human rights of women and of all minorities
5. Address the plight of refugees, migrants, and stateless persons, especially children
6. Understand, accept and appreciate our diversity of identities and richness of histories
7. Live with one another in harmony and tolerance.

We are alarmed by the pandemic of xenophobia and Islamophobia on the one hand and the uncontrolled growth, on the other hand, of repressive state laws dealing ostensibly with terrorism or blasphemy, which are enforced with discrimination and oppression.

We are pleased however, that even as we meet, people in diverse countries of the Muslim world from Tunisia to Algeria, from Egypt to Yemen are raising protests against oppressive laws and unequivocally rejecting dictatorial governments. In full solidarity, we applaud their efforts to bring about positive change towards just and participatory governance.

We reaffirm that the overriding principle of peace is justice, with mercy and compassion. It is imperative that our concept of Justice encompasses the basic human right to a life free from fear, hunger and want.

The Assembly has been deeply moved by the testimonies of people, especially women and youth, living in conflict zones. We therefore, call upon all governments, all power-holders and all stakeholders, throughout the world, in places where violent conflicts are occurring to:

1. Support genuine demilitarization, thus making available additional resources to meet human needs.

2. Rehabilitate and rebuild in the areas of conflict, the infrastructures necessary to sustain life with dignity and humanity.
3. Empower disadvantaged vulnerable and excluded communities, especially women, youth, indigenous, displaced and disabled peoples
4. Promote and monitor effective ceasefire and peace-building agreements and programs in consultation with women, marginalized communities and other persons/groups affected by the conflict.
5. Restore participatory governance at all levels: international, national and local
6. Establish Commissions of Justice and Reconciliation to ensure that a sustainable and lasting peace is built upon the recovery of truth and the full provision of justice
7. Build human capacity to realize the above

We meet here in Pattani, in the midst of the people of Southern Thailand. We have heard their cries of anguish and their pleas for help. We have also had opportunity to observe, and learn from representatives of the government of Thailand, about the development initiatives being undertaken in response. But conflict continues unabated, with unacceptable loss of human life and untold human suffering, despite such response. More is clearly needed. Therefore, we call upon the government of Thailand:

- to secure the protection of all peoples of Southern Thailand,
- to bring an immediate end to continuing abuses, discriminations and denials and
- to fully support the entitlement of all peoples of Southern Thailand to respect for their identity, cultural diversity, resources and way of life. Putting an immediate end to a culture of impunity, is an absolute imperative in this regard.

AMAN strongly recommends and fully supports a speedy and just negotiated settlement of the conflict and an immediate cessation of all forms of violence. To that end, AMAN urges:

- the peoples of Southern Thailand to agree upon and designate their representatives to the peace negotiations, and
- the government of Thailand to ensure the full participation of such designated representatives in such peace negotiations.

FOSTERING INTRA-FAITH AND INTER-FAITH UNDERSTANDING IN PURSUIT OF WORLD PEACE

Intra-faith and inter-faith differences and disputes have persisted right through history. In itself, this is not a cause for grave concern. What distresses us is when these disputes lead to intra-faith or inter-faith violence. This paper addresses four concerns: Why does violence occur? How can we minimise intra-faith and inter-faith violence and conflict? Why is it important to minimise these conflicts at this juncture in history--- a juncture when we appear to be overwhelmed by colossal global challenges? In the midst of these challenges, what is the role of Islam in articulating and reinforcing a global consciousness anchored in our common humanity?

Why violence occurs

Intra-faith violence has to be distinguished from inter-faith violence. A dogmatic approach to text, teaching and tradition (3Ts) augmented by narrow, bigoted attitudes spawned through the centuries appears to be the driving force behind this type of extremism. It is because such approaches and attitudes are prevalent that it is easy to arouse passions against another sect or doctrinal school within the same religious community.

Our general description of intra-faith violence actually fits in with Sunni-Shiite conflicts in places like Pakistan and Iraq. There is a tendency among some Muslims to put the blame for such conflicts solely upon foreign elements. Whatever the role of outside forces, it is worth emphasising that dogmatic, bigoted thinking within the sect or group is the principal underlying cause of intra-faith violence.

In the case of inter-faith violence, rigid adherence to dogma seems to be less of a culprit. Indeed, faith itself--- the nature of one's belief and the personages and practices associated with it--- has a secondary role in what are portrayed in the mass media as 'inter-faith' conflicts. More precisely, the Israel-Arab conflict is not a conflict between Jews and Muslims. It is a people's right to their land, their dispossession and the harsh oppression of the dispossessed that explains the conflict. Similarly, the Kashmir conflict is not about Hinduism or Islam. Again, it is about the right of self-determination and a people's struggle to establish their own identity and autonomy. The long-drawn conflict in Mindanao, in southern Philippines is not so much a fight between Christians and Muslims as a conflagration that has grown out of the displacement and mar-

ginalisation of a historically rooted community that resisted both Spanish and American colonialism in the past and continues to oppose encroachment upon its rights by the elite in Manila today. The decades old conflict in Sri Lanka between the Sinhalese majority and the Tamil minority in the north was essentially a battle over rights and freedoms between two communities which had very little to do with Buddhism or Hinduism as religions.

Though faith is not a primary factor, religion does get dragged into conflicts. Iraq is a good example. The real issue was the invasion and occupation of Iraq in 2003. But when, on the heels of the invasion, Christian evangelists from the US and other parts of the world moved into Iraq in a big way to propagate their religion among the Muslims, groups within the Muslim community began to react. Tensions heightened. A similar pattern had unfolded in Afghanistan following the US-led invasion of the country in October 2001.

Minimising Intra-faith and Inter-Faith Violence.

To reduce intra-faith violence, there has to be a concerted, continuous, concentrated endeavour to wean away the populace from bigoted, dogmatic notions of religion. Religious education in a number of Muslim countries will have to be revamped so that the perennial, universal, inclusive values, principles and ideals of Islam--- the essence of the faith--- will emerge more strongly as its defining attributes. Religious teachers will have to be re-trained to appreciate the nexus between a religious practice and its underlying meaning. Apart from harnessing the mass media to disseminate a more progressive approach to the religion, mosques should also be utilised to the fullest to convey the essence of the faith.

What is perceived as inter-faith violence, it is obvious, can only be overcome if the real causes of the conflicts that confront us which, as we have seen, are not related to religion as such are resolved with justice and fairness. Since the political actors that matter in these conflicts cannot be expected to forge such solutions--- given their interests--- public opinion will have to be mobilised with greater vigour to compel them to work towards peace. The new media, and more importantly, the new generation will have to play a big role in this.

Regardless of whether bigotry in the case of intra-faith violence and the underlying causes of conflict in the case of inter-faith violence are addressed, there will have to be dialogue within the community and between Muslims and people of other religious affiliations. Intra-Muslim dialogue has not been given the emphasis it deserves. And yet it is perhaps more urgent than inter-faith dialogue. The various sects and schools of thought within the community (ummah) should sit down and discuss their differences and similarities in an amicable atmosphere. This is a challenge that the Organisation of Islamic Conference (OIC) should take up. A number of intra-faith dialogues should be conducted over a period of time.

As far as inter-faith dialogue is concerned, Muslims should not be afraid that it will erode their identity or compromise their religious tenets. Whatever the motives of some of those who champion inter-faith dialogues may be, Muslims should remember that the Noble Qur'an not only encourages us to know the other but also espouses justice and compassion for all human beings, indeed for all creation.

There is something else we can do to minimise both intra and inter-faith violence. We should organise massive campaigns against violence as a way of settling disputes within a religious community and between religious communities. The peaceful resolution of all types of conflicts should become the culture of the human race.

The Importance of this Effort at this Juncture.

Why is it imperative that we combat violence at this juncture of our history? The human race is faced with monumental crises in almost every sphere of human existence. These crises--- from the environmental crisis and economic crisis to the crisis of the family and the crisis of the individual--- threaten the very survival of our species. As if these crises were not enough, the natural calamities that have become more frequent in recent times from earthquakes to cyclones remind us of our vulnerability and fragility. We are, as it were, at the edge of the precipice. Or, to put it differently, we are five minutes to midnight. The clock is ticking away. How can we at a time like this remain embroiled in intra-faith and inter-faith squabbles and conflicts? How can we kill one another because of some dogma or doctrine? How can we allow our quarrels over land and rights to tear us asunder? How can we go on using violence against each other when our very existence is at stake?

Islam and our Common Humanity

Given the momentous significance of the hour, there is no doubt at all that the philosophy embodied in the Qur'an and mirrored in the life of Prophet Muhammad (the Sunnah), has a message for humankind. The bedrock of Islam, the belief in the one God, in the one God of all the universes, of all creation, of the whole of humankind, offers a sound and stable foundation for unity, the unity of the human family, the unity of all living beings. Indeed, the Qur'an itself acknowledges that "All mankind were once one single community..." (Sura 2: 213). At the same time it celebrates diversity within the human family. It says, "Unto every one of you have We appointed a (different) law and way of life. And if God had so willed He could surely have made you all one single community: but (He willed it otherwise) in order to test you by means of what He has vouchsafed unto you. Vie then with one another in doing good works! Unto God you all must return; and then He will make you truly understand all that on which you were wont to differ." (Sura 5:48).

It is not just in its view of unity and diversity that the Qur'an offers valuable guidance to humankind at this point in our history. It goes further and assures us implicitly that it is not nationality or tribal affiliation or sectarian loyalty or clan solidarity or ancestry or gender that matters in the sight of God. "Verily", it says, "the noblest of you in the sight of God is the one who is most deeply conscious of Him." (Sura 49:13). This is strengthened by the Qur'anic affirmation that dignity is the common attribute of all human beings. It says, "Now indeed, We have conferred dignity on the children of Adam..." (Sura 17: 70).

There is no need to reiterate that the Qur'an's commitment to the unity of humankind and the dignity of the human being is a powerful answer to intra-faith and inter-faith antagonisms and animosities. This is why while the Qur'an is part of the solution we Muslims, it is sad, are part of the problem.

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Photo by: Lance Woodruff

WHO IS A PROGRESSIVE MUSLIM?

A progressive Muslim is one who is firmly grounded in the Qur'anic values of truth (haq), justice ('adl), compassion (rahmah), wisdom (hikmah) and does service to others rather than being served by others. A progressive Muslim does not believe in sectarian Islam (sunni or shi'ah or Isma'ili or Deobandi or Bareilvi or ahl-e-hadith or salafi Islam but rises above all these sects and gives importance to Qur'an above everything else.

A progressive Islam not only does not adopt the sectarian approach but is respectful of entire humanity and human dignity as per Qur'an (17:70). He leaves mutual differences, ideological and theological to Allah alone and does not condemn anyone who differs from him/her as kafirs as often sectarian Muslims do. It only widens differences and intensifies conflict. A progressive Muslim uses, as per Qur'an, wisdom (hikmah) and goodly words (maw'izat al-Hasanah) in discussion and leaves rest to Allah. He does not try to be judgemental.

A progressive Muslim is least influenced by personal prejudices and always gives more importance to knowledge than his opinion. Qur'an condemns prejudiced opinion (zan) and promotes knowledge ('ilm). Also, openness of mind is a seminal quality and avoids arrogance born more out of ignorance than knowledge. Those who have little knowledge are more arrogant and those who have greater degree of knowledge know limitations of their own knowledge and hence tend to be humble.

A progressive Muslim first of all studies his/her own religion in depth and tries to understand, as objectively as possible, the causes of differences between different religions and shows full respect for others beliefs. It is those who do not know their own religion, much less those of others, who condemn religion of others. The Qur'an says, "And abuse not those whom they call upon besides Allah lest, exceeding the limits they abuse Allah through ignorance." (6:109). Further in this verse Allah says, "Thus to everyone people have We made their deeds fair-seeming; then to their Lord is their return so He will inform them of what they did." Thus ultimately it is Allah who will judge. We human beings when we judge, we judge more out of ignorance and arrogance of our ego than knowledge and selflessness.

Also, a progressive Muslim celebrates diversity since diversity is a creation of Allah and if Allah desired He could have made entire humanity one community. (5:48). The Qur'an also says, "And of His signs is the

creation of the heavens and the earth and the diversity of your tongues and colours. Surely there are signs in this for the learned." Thus a progressive Muslim will never have any prejudice against any language or colour of skin or any colour for that matter as these are all creations of Allah.

Also, both men and women are creation of Allah and both need to be treated with same degree of dignity. Allah has created all species in couples and it is necessary for survival of all species. No species will survive unless it is created in couples. Thus feminine of the couple is as important as masculine and in human beings both genders must be treated equally. Moreover gender is a social and cultural construct. Whereas sex is natural gender is social and cultural.

A progressive Muslim knows this very well and treats both men and women with equal dignity and believes in giving equal rights to both. And in today's context gender equality becomes a crucial test for a progressive Muslim.

Thus a progressive Muslim will give more importance to Qur'anic pronouncements of gender equality than feudal female servitude and would not consider these [provisions of Shari'ah laws as eternal and unalterable. A progressive Muslim, therefore, would reconstruct Shari'ah laws in this respect and accord equal rights to women who are also believers. One believer cannot be superior to another believer. Male superiority is a human construct and human construct cannot override divine injunction. Also, functional differences i.e. bearing children should not result in distinction of superior and inferior.

A progressive Muslim would accord seeking knowledge highest priority as knowledge has been equated with light (nor) and ignorance to darkness (zulmat) and Allah brings out believers from darkness to light. And the Prophet (PBUH) has said that a moment's reflection is more important than whole nights worship ('ibadat). Thus knowledge has priority over worship. Thus these are the characteristics of a progressive Muslim and those who imbibe these characteristics would survive all the challenges of all the times and would not face any difficulty in keeping pace with the changing times.



Dr Asghar Ali Engineer is the Chairman of the Asian Muslim Action Network and also leads the Indian based institute of Islamic Studies and Centre for Study of Society and Secularism in Mumbai

“SPRINGTIME OF REVOLUTIONS”

That's how Hobsbawm, the acclaimed English historian described the series of revolutions erupting across Europe in late 1840s. A hundred and seventy years later the Arab world is engulfed in a similar sort of situation, with of course, one major difference. While none in Europe succeeded in their immediate goals of getting rid of the ruling regimes, some of the Arabs have already got rid of their absolutely autocratic, awfully inept, brutally oppressive, and extremely corrupt regimes within a matter of a few weeks. Yes, some are still holding forth, albeit with exceedingly violent means. In the post colonial world, most Arab and North African states seemed encapsulated in time where democracy, freedom of expression, or any accountability is considered tantamount to subversion, provoking exemplary punishment.

For long, the ruling regimes of nearly all the states in the region had evolved three broad governing principles. First, the destiny of each state was designed to suit the imperial game plan of the US for the entire region. Second, zero tolerance for those citizens/groups who disagreed with the first rule of the game. Third, providing decent livelihood to the vast majority with self respect was made secondary to rampant corruption perpetrated by rank and file of ruling regimes and their cronies. As a consequence of these undeclared principles, there was no accountability at any strata of governance. Rhetoric replaced dialogue as the only means of communication between the rulers and the ruled, which in reality meant stifling of all dissenting voices. There was also squandering of national wealth by the ruling elite, as they ushered in a culture of grotesque consumerism, unconcerned about the need to recreate wealth through reproductive means. Last but not least, caving in by the ruling elite to the US imperial framework, willingly or under compulsion, completely shattered any national pride.

There was nothing to hold on to as a nation. All these regressive acts by the state created space for ordinary citizens to develop deep resentment against the state and its repressive apparatus. The ongoing spate of revolts convey the sentiments of a vast majority who would rather prefer to embark on the road to an uncharted future than continue to suffer the ignominy of being treated with utter disdain.

Amidst the raging turmoil one particular phenomenon has not received much attention yet. All the rebellious states are predominantly Muslim, but none however at least so far, have any declared intention of creating an Iranian type theocratic state. Instead nearly all the revolutions are clamouring for a democratic, accountable, and inclusive order. This dimension is relevant in view of radical/militant Islam trying to impose itself all across Muslim states and beyond. This offers two very pertinent lessons. One, the widely held western view of Islam's incompatibility with modern and secular democracy is proving wrong. Two, autocracy in whatever form, monarchy or otherwise is no longer accepted as a method of governance across the entire region. It might trigger the collapse of the whole edifice of balance of power in the region, which can tempt the possibility of a long due drastic change in power relations and in the wider society at large. This in turn will have implications over the role of Islam in the region and its impact in other Muslim societies.

For centuries before the European colonization, the entire region of North Africa and the present Arab world was the prized colony of the Ottoman Empire. The latter itself had long declined into infirmity and had nothing positive to offer either to themselves to or to their colonies. The First World War rattled the region from its long slumber and ushered it into the modern world. However, it was not until several decades later, in the aftermath of the oil boom, that modernity, in a variety of senses, could make its presence felt.

Yet, its core essence was still far away. Although by the early second half of the last century the region was divided into multiple nation states ruled by self appointed autocrats in whatever garb, tribal loyalty overshadowed national identity. Since the oil boom, sudden unimaginable liquid assets pushed the key issues of governance under the carpet. Moreover, Israeli aggression against the Palestinians in particular, and the Arab world in general, persuaded ordinary people of the region to be cautious with their respective governments. But it couldn't be a permanent arrangement. The long pent up rage had to burst at some point, and that is exactly what the world has been witnessing over the past several weeks.

Conventional wisdom would be tempted to draw pertinent lessons from these upheavals. How exactly events will unfold in the near future is difficult to predict but the following directions are quite clear. One, feudalism in whatever form and in whichever society will be very hard to sell as a civilized method of governance in this modern age. Two, national aspiration will play a dominant role in mobilizing popular opinion; rather than tribal loyalty. Three, the ploy of autocrats using Islam as a bogey to suppress popular opinion in and project a mock fight against imperialists, will no longer work.

A great opportunity has been created to reorder each respective state's internal power relations. Hopefully this will create space for rethinking the entire Islamic framework of relegating non Islamic people as infidels and learning to live with them in peace and harmony, which in other words, could trigger a long due Islamic reformation movement. Finally, recalling the European experience could be useful. Although the mid 19th century revolutions failed in their immediate objectives, they nevertheless compelled most of the states to bring about drastic reforms in the rules of governance. Within a few decades of the failed revolutions most European states ushered in drastic reforms that helped institutionalize democratic practices in state and society. What Europe is today, is largely the result of those reforms. Will the Arabs and North Africans follow the same track?

Ali Ahmed ziauddin from Dhaka is a researcher and a historical analyst.

REGIONAL PEACE ISSUES AND CITIZENS INITIATIVES

Background

The prevalence of peace between the different communities of Jammu and Kashmir is the need of the hour. The radicalization and polarization along communal lines in Jammu and Ladakh is a contrast to Kashmir which, despite suffering the torments of the 1947 partition, maintained peace, love and communal harmony; which prompted Mahatma Gandhi to say that he “saw a ray of hope in Kashmir”. However, the Jamaat e Islami (J-e-I), which calls for the establishment of Nizaam e Mustafa and Islamic State, are communal, as can be witnessed from their role in the small communal riots which erupted in Islamabad (Anantnag) in 1986. These riots were alleged to be managed by the Centre to topple Ghulam Muhammad Shah’s government. Several of the Pandits were offered shelter by many J-e-I activists in their homes. The Pandit exodus with the onset of militancy had more to do with the policies of then Governor Jagmohan than with Muslim militants who appealed to pandits time and again not to leave the valley.

Ladakh and Jammu are different, in every aspect, from the valley. Ladakh has a Buddhist majority and Jammu, a Hindu majority. The Buddhists maintained a social boycott of the Muslims of Leh district, which was declared and enforced by Ladakh Buddhist Association (LBA) in 1989 and continued till 1992, and witnessed several clashes between Buddhist and Muslim youth, the burning down of several Muslim properties and homes and even some cases of forced conversions of Muslims to Buddhism. During the boycott, Buddhists who visited their Muslim friends or acquaintances or patronized Muslim shops were penalized by LBA activists, and social, economic and every other relation between the communities were almost completely severed. Although now, the relations between the Buddhists and Muslims have improved to a certain extent, the atmosphere of suspicion remains.

The Hindus, especially Dogras of Jammu were always against the special status of J&K and tried to rob it of its distinct character. The atmosphere is so communally charged that the Muslims are living under threat in Jammu and if a resistance leader happens to hold a Press Conference in Jammu, he/she is attacked by the Hindutva goons. Recently, during the 2008 agitation, the Amarnath Sanghrash Smithi held an economic blockade against the Muslims of the Valley and no truck carrying essential supplies was allowed to pass through the Jammu-Srinagar highway which strangled and choked the Valley’s lifeline. Some Kashmiri truck drivers were attacked and one was killed by some fanatics. Despite all these provocations in 2008 and even in 2010 the Valley remained calm and lakhs of Amarnath Yatris performed their rituals in Peace and Solace. The spirit of communal harmony and love for humanity is still prevalent among Kashmiris despite the shameful acts of killings, abuse and arson continuing unabated.

The communally charged atmosphere still remains, as do intra-state problems within these three regions. The rural population is getting more recruitment in government jobs than the urban ones. Also, recently, a reservation bill for Scheduled Tribes (ST) was announced which entitled them to 8% reservation in all government jobs, and this ST is comprised of only Hindus, thus fuelling resentment among the Muslims, though the syncretic inclusive and pluralistic culture of Sufism and Rishism is still prevalent in each soul of Kashmir, although time and again, politicians and alien invaders have tried to disrupt the same. Some lessons must be learnt from these cultures.

The pluralistic Sufi culture of inclusiveness fails in the face of economic interests, national interests and rights of any community

This culture of pluralism and Peace cannot be maintained in the absence of equality and justice.

The politics of appeasement can have a negative effect on this culture and can communalize the entire atmosphere.

In Kashmir people have lost belief in the peace process and every initiative is looked at with an eye of suspicion. In addition to this, justice has not been delivered and established yet; since thousands of perpetrators of rape, custodial killings, torture and disappearances are still roaming free.

Citizens initiatives

There is no concrete citizens initiative present in the valley. In Kashmir only Post Reactive initiatives for Peace are maintained and mostly by the victims of Human Rights Violations like, Association of Parents of Disappeared Persons (APDP) and certain civil society groups working for restoration of Human Rights.

Though the new Right to Information Act (RTI) is one of the revolutionary acts implemented which empowers people, yet RTI activists working in conflict areas are threatened and are always vulnerable to the State's wrath and there are no genuine writers, intellectuals or peace activists working in the field.

Also, the so called "Civil Society" in Kashmir is divided, between State and the Secessionists. NGOs are also infamous in Kashmir as more than 3500 exist on paper, but only few have displayed consistent work..

Trade between the two parts of Kashmir was also initiated to break the ice but the businessmen are frequently harassed by State and Security Agencies and they are alleged to be also spying for the enemy nation. This hampers the easing up of relations between the two Nations as well as the peaceful resolution of the Kashmir issue.

Mushtaq Ul Haq Ahmad Sikander is Writer-Activist based in Srinagar, Kashmir and can be contacted at sikandarmushtaq@gmail.com



WOMEN IN ARMED CONFLICT: KEY ISSUES AND STRATEGIES FOR ACTION FOR ADDRESSING GENDER, PEACE AND SECURITY



Photo by: Lance Woodruff

Issues during and/or as a consequence of the conflict

- Increase in violence against women and girls due to religious fanaticism, oppression and structural inequity
- Sexual violence i.e. mass rape of women and girls is used as a strategy by armed forces to dishonour the targeted community.
- Regressive actions and impositions by extreme forces of religion, impact on the education of girls, cause mobility restrictions, impede participation of women and girls, impose restrictive dress code, and silences women's voices and choices.
- Rise in sectarian violence due to sharpening of minority identities during the conflict
- The rising drop-out rate from schools, makes young girls highly vulnerable to sexual abuse, their use in drugs trafficking and pornography.
- Rise in overall sexual exploitation and domestic violence making violence a 'normal part of the culture' i.e. normalizing a culture of violence in the society.
- Violence is perpetrated by both state forces and non-state actors i.e. insurgents, religious fanatics, rebel groups etc.
- Women suffer the trauma of personal loss of family members, the stigma of suffering sexual violence, the loss of financial or material standing. 'The conflict begins at the end of a war when we have to deal with losing everything.' Women run high risk of post traumatic stress disorder.
- Displacement an inevitable (IDP) consequences of conflict and stress of coping with a new environment with all its infrastructural discomfort and uncertainty.
- Ever present threats of further violence to self, family and/or property.
- There is no justice or accountability for many of the violations and crimes committed during conflict and thus there is a culture of impunity prevailing around conflict- related crimes.
- Often justice for crimes against women are settled by paying blood money to the relative of the survivor of such crimes; or the crime is condoned because of corruption.
- Conflict leaves behind many widows, half-widows and orphans.
- Other manifestations of the conflict include rise in trafficking of women and children, drug abuse and HIV/AIDS
- Women are left out of peace and conflict resolution processes and negotiations
- Women Human Rights Defenders and Activists are targeted for their activism making it difficult to support women and their issues in high-risk areas.
- Conflicts are sometimes referred to traditional conflict resolution mechanisms such as the jirgas that are male-dominated bodies with an orientation to traditional gender roles reinforcing the gender inequalities.

'The concept of Gender Equality is inherent in Islam. A religious person is subversive and always strives for change for the betterment of the society.'

- Asghar Ali Engineer

Strategies and Actions

- Working directly with community women affected by the conflict on issues of peace, conflict transformation/resolution and security
- Programs and trainings for women's empowerment on education, peace and conflict orientation, on Human Rights, and micro credit for women's economic empowerment.
- Initiate programs on trauma training and training on disaster management
- Inclusion of training on counselling, advocacy and lobbying to provide psycho-social support and raise their issues of concern to the authorities
- Creation of a safe space for support to survivors of violence, that safely directs the expression of pain and trauma
- Pressure tactics such as demonstrations, rallies, fasting, mobilizing to protest violence or picketing to demand return of abductees, demand for repeal of draconian laws and policies such as Armed Forces Special Powers Act in India.
- Forming of formal associations to demand justice such as widows association, disappeared persons associations etc.
- Use of international mechanism such as the visit of the Special Rapporteur on violence against women.
- Police laws should be reformed and updated to ensure that they are more sensitive and responsive to issues of armed conflict and women's interests.
- Creation of solidarity groups outside the conflict situation by those who may be in a position to pressure the aggressor of the conflict situation.
- Dialogue with traditional/religious leaders for women's inclusion in all processes of society including peace processes
- Create a larger pool of human rights lawyers willing to take up cases in defense of women's rights.
- Explore and institute alternative justice mechanisms such as people's tribunal, public hearings etc.
- Adoption of the principles of USCR 1325 on women's protection and participation in a National Action Plan with a feasible implementation policy that could be evaluated and monitored.

'The preoccupation with outward appearances of women is disturbing when there are more pressing issues facing the Muslim community such as corruption.'

– Dr. Chandra Muzaffar

Long-Term Strategies

- Gender-mainstreaming in all social institutions and particularly education. Have efforts for domestic law reform to introduce new laws and prohibitions on conflict related crimes and violations against women.
- Ensure compilation and dissemination of information on how to access justice for women at all levels.
- Introduce more focuses and improved monitoring and evaluation mechanisms to monitor the positive policies on women's empowerment and inclusion
- Creation of a Gender Sensitivity index (GSI) as one of the tools to measure the Human Development Index. Monitor a country's human development index not only in terms of levels of education and health; but also in terms of gender sensitive of such programs, policies and institutions.
- Inclusion of Gender Budgeting for all the gender-related programs and policies.
- Strengthening implementation of laws and policies
- Working with men and boys toward change in attitude for long-term prevention of violence and social transformation for gender equality
- Disaggregating data for analysis of different realities for men and women, boys and girls, ethnicity, location, age, special challenges.

-Submitted by the participants of the workshop-

Assembly workshop Facilitated by: Ms Vahida Nainar & Ms Kiran Bhatia

Youth Vision and Actions for Peace

Three groups were formed to discuss three questions about peace on the first day of the youth workshop.

Question 1 What is Peace?

Group I

- Obedience to the laws of our creator
- Not just the absence of hostility and suppression but the presence of justice
- Fulfilment of basic needs
- It is the character of giving

Group II

- It is harmony among human beings and all species and every entity in the universe
- Inner peace and outer peace are two side of same coin
- Respect for human rights means peace between countries within countries and among people's Respect is essential
- Peace with environment is: if we don't achieve harmony with the natural world all human peace is demolished
- Respect for human rights secures peace at all levels of human interaction
- Respect must have a total approach towards rights i.e. respecting, protecting and fulfilling in knowledge of our responsible role towards others.

Group III

- Peace is blooming flowers
- Accepting others
- Unique society, living without, discrimination and in equity
- Doing good to others and trusting them to do good
- Respect
- Peace is the ability to cope with conflicts in our selves, tradition and with culture, religion, life and arts, ideologies, indigenous cultures and minorities



Peace is not merely the absence of conflict. It is an essential harmony found in the mind and heart of the human and in the course of the universe. If we don't establish harmony with the natural world, human peace will be profoundly diminished. Peace in our day must address the alienation of the human community from the earth community. Therefore, peace must encompass the insights of the indigenous traditions, minorities and the marginal as well as the insights of those communities that appear to be mainstream and influential. Peace must encompass all things and embrace the rights of all who live on the earth.

Question 2 What are you trying to achieve ?

Group I

- Capturing a wide range of ideas
- To better understand the concept of peace and how to get there
- To know about multi-cultural perspectives
- Building ties
- Building innovative and creative action plans

Group II

- To know the best practices in the youth sector
- Sharing ideas to facilitate common understanding
- Networking with youth groups

Group III

- Activating the youth potentials
- Actual best practices
- Different points of view
- Innovative approaches
- Story sharing
- Sustainability
- Creativity

We are trying to put in place a genuine dialogue which respects the insights, beliefs and aspirations of those who differ from us, in seemingly irreconcilable and conflicting positions. In this, we will seek our basic humanity in sharing with each other the story of our lives and experiences

Question 3 What are the challenges of peace? Insights?

Group I

- Self centeredness,
- Personal interest
- Cultural diversity, if lived too rigidly and not dynamically
- Ignorance
- Corruption in media and politics
- Promotion of violence by the television and film industry
- Power struggle
- Cowardliness
- Free-market fundamentalism and globalization
- Ideologies
- Militarization
- Climate change
- Shameless Privatization

Group II

- Different kinds of thinking about peace
- Terrorism and extremism
- Global concerns
- No legal consistency
- Vested interests overcoming common concerns
- Inability to see things as they truly are
- Indifference
- Protracted conflict, and war.
- Biodiversity loss and the destruction of forests and ecosystems
- Un regulated Wall Street speculation
- The emphasizing of differences instead of our common human values and similarities

Group III

- Lack of education
- Refusal of people
- Political conflict
- Close-mindedness
- Misuse of power
- Selfish living
- Corruption
- Obstruction of justice
- Bad government
- Unequal distribution of wealth,
- Peak oil and conflicts over resources
- Undemocratic democracies and nation states owned by multinational corporations.

Peace is most challenged by conflicts rooted in the inability to see things as they truly are. Distortions of self interest and corporate power cloud our sense of a common humanity and disfigure both our common inheritance and our shared destiny. Therefore our task is to resolve our personal distortions in order to engage in healing the conflicts found in the world.

Facilitated by Dr.Yunis Yasin

Youth role in combating challenges of Climate Change

Asia-Pacific Youth network on Climate Change

Introductory Background

Questions, responses and explanations helped clear up some ideas around the issue of human interference with the global atmosphere. Carbon cycle and the emission of greenhouse gases were discussed. One outcome was that the climate and the global environment represent a fragile Balance and are perpetuated in Cycles. The Balances must be maintained and the Cycle is supposed to flow uninterrupted. Otherwise Imbalances will lead to catastrophes, scarcity of food, water and other resources often resulting in conflict and mass migration.

Three main causes of climate change.

1- A harmful agriculture, industry and food system is accounting for 40 % of global greenhouse gas emissions. This system is addicted to ever-increasing amounts of fuel and chemicals which are harmful to humans and the natural environment. The production of artificial fertilizers and chemical pesticides, itself, requires huge amounts of energy. Transportation into far away countries, processing, distribution and refrigeration consume a lot of energy depriving us of fossil fuels. The soil gets deprived of its micronutrients, worms and microorganisms and while growing amounts of chemical fertilizers are applied; the yields decrease. Unsustainable hybrid seeds and genetically modified crops (GMO's) consume huge amounts of water for irrigation. As a consequence the groundwater table falls and more powerful pumps must be employed which require more energy. Chemical and pharmaceutical industries falsely promote GMO's as the solution to hunger and Climate Change. If observed in more detail it becomes clear that they would further worsen the situation in many ways. Through the employment of monocultures and chemicals, the soil releases its carbon content into the atmosphere and gets vulnerable to soil erosion. More compact soil is handled with bigger machinery, needing more fuels.

2- Deforestation and unsustainable meat production account for approximately a third of all Green House Gases (GHG's). Plants and trees and forests take up carbon in their cell structure which is released (and also released from the organic matter in the soil) when trees are felled or burned and land forests converted into unsustainable monoculture farms or cattle ground for grazing.

3- Fossil fuels for energy production mostly for use in urban areas, industry and transport. Oil, gas, coal and nuclear power are considered fossil fuels since they are extracted from deep underground. These energies cannot, under any circumstances be called, and promoted as clean energies; as is touted regarding clean coal and nuclear energy, by their respective industries who claim to be climate-friendly. Since the carbon in the atmosphere has to be reduced dramatically; these technologies have to be abandoned and replaced. Nuclear energy must be abandoned for many other reasons. This technology is fundamentally flawed. A major attempt has been made by developed countries to dump atomic reactors and wastes into developing countries since they have shown their inefficiency and problematic nature.

Promoting awareness and climate-friendly solutions

John Brinkman emphasized that the atmosphere and biodiversity should be protected and preserved not only for the sake to sustain our lives but because of the reverence for life itself, sacredness of nature, its beauty and inherent value.

Important is a broad education on the causes of “Climate Chaos” acknowledging that it is the result of human misbehaviour and intentional political indifference of Western countries. Europe and USA emitted most of the GHG’s and caused Climate Chaos while Southern and developing countries suffer the gravest consequences. This leads to the idea of “climate debt” that developed countries owe to the developing ones. This debt should be repaid by providing financial mechanisms to enable the worldwide shift to renewable energies such as solar, wind, micro-hydro, geothermal and tidal energy and biomass. An immediate transfer of the most efficient technologies to developing countries should be facilitated. Large scale hydro-power, in the form of big dams must be excluded.

Reforestation including fruit, nut and medicinal trees should be promoted and implemented in rural and urban areas. This could be integrated in religious celebrations or for celebration of life, when children are born, or a young couple gets married, and why not plant trees instead of cutting them for Christmas?. Forests must be protected and religious and youth movements could each play their role.

Bio-diverse Organic Farming should replace industrial chemical agriculture and monocultures. Combining traditional farming methods with modern knowledge and research in the field of small-scale, bio-diverse and sustainable family/community farming is an priority option. Soils could be restored (with compost and mulch), biodiversity enhanced, millions of jobs created, climate change mitigated, local economies re-established and human health benefited all by a single means. Since politicians keep silent on this manifold solution (or are ignorant about it) the topic must be vigorously pushed forward into the public debate. Movements are gaining momentum all around the globe to defend our right to healthy local food. Farmers must be trained in organic agriculture and youth educated about their consumer behaviour and the health benefits of organically grown foods. This becomes especially interesting against the

background of peak oil. In the near-term scenario, oil supplies are in decline because of the end of cheap oil (oil easy to extract) and growing demand for energy. This will lead to a dramatic increase in the price of oil price over the next two decades, resulting in higher food prices as well. The only viable alternative seems to be self reliance with locally-grown organic foods and tree crops. The peak oil thread has given the impulse for a worldwide, growing movement of towns striving for resilience.

Transition Towns strive to get independent of fossil fuels, to withstand the economic shocks of fluctuating oil prices. Transition towns try to integrate all different approaches which revive the local economy, create jobs and lower GHG emissions by implementing renewable energies, agro-forestry, organic farming and, finally, strengthening the circulation of the local money supply by using complementary, regional or local currencies. Young open minded representatives of various media should be invited to discuss all these topics on a regular basis, and to raise concern over the matter. Inspiration can be drawn from many and diverse sources:

www.transcend.org
www.sustainablepeace.org
www.transitiontowns.org
www.transitionnetwork.org
www.futurepolicy.org
www.navdanya.org
www.sekem.org
www.rightlivelivelihood.org

Facilitated by
Dr. Yunus Yasin and John Brinkman

Letters to the Editor

Dear Editor,

I have seen many refugees in Aceh while working with NGOs, however, I realized that the Acehese situation was not as bad when compared to that of Thailand.

I met a couple who had left their homeland to save their marriage, because their culture did not allow a marriage based on love. Being illegal in a foreign country is a serious problem specially if the families have children with no citizenship. Thanks to NGOs, like AMAN, which assist them in rebuilding their new life in whatever way possible. There may be many reasons for these people to leave their own countries, however, we should not forget that they are also human beings with rights and dreams of a bright future for their children.

Firghana Alya
Aceh, Indonesia

Dear Editor,

In the past month I have met a number of refugees and asylum seekers in Bangkok and after speaking to them, I have been distressed at the situation they are in. I hope students and families in Bangkok read this particular issue of AMANA and try and join hands in helping these families who flee their homeland in search of a better life and with a lot of expectations which were never fulfilled.

Asma Sa'lea
Pattani, Thailand

Dear Editor,

This letter is about the article 'Asylum Seekers and their Quest for Survival in Thailand' published in the last issue of AMANA. The article made me experience the insecurities and vulnerabilities of people without an 'identity'. The article reverberates with the sentiment that 'we are not doing enough' and vicariously makes a forceful call for inclusion of the hitherto excluded asylum seekers into the mainstream. Also, the assistance that AMAN is trying to give to these people is very praiseworthy and may many more like and kind-hearted individuals join you in this noble mission.

Satya Prasoon
Kolkata, India

Readers are welcome to send comments. Letters to the Editor will be published in the next issue. You may write to the Editor at amana@arf-asia.org

EVENTS

The 2nd Young Asian Muslim Women's Leadership Training Workshop took place in Nong Chok Thailand from the 20th to the 23rd of December 2011.

The workshop saw participation from participants, from nine different countries in Asia. Participants came from Afghanistan, Bangladesh, India, Indonesia, Myanmar, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Kyrgyz republic and Iran.



The 7th School of Peace Studies 2011
5th - 27th April, Nong Chok Thailand. Twenty Six participants from thirteen countries across Asia participated in the peace school this year.



The Amana Media Initiative (Amana) is a broad-based media project committed to promoting greater understanding and peace within Muslim communities, between faiths and among various cultural communities in Asia. Amana means trust, stemming from 'aman', the Arabic word for peace. Amana was founded in April 2005 by the Asian Resource Foundation (ARF) and the Asian Muslim Action Network (AMAN). The ARF supports holistic development by building awareness to mobilise and share resources in order to help marginalised groups in Asia. AMAN aims to build understanding and solidarity among Muslims and other faith communities in Asia towards people's empowerment, human rights, justice and peace. With over 1500 members, Amana's network spans Asia and is coordinated from Bangkok, Thailand.

Publications: AMANA Magazine, Amana news online, Amana website
(www.arf-asia.org/amana)

Focus: Islam and peace, interfaith partnerships, development initiatives,
human rights, gender and peace

Further information about the Amana Media Initiative is available at
www.arf-asia.org/amana

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