

October 27, 2011

DPI/NGO Briefing

“Focus on Faith: An Introduction  
To the Baha’i Faith”

1. Background Information:

“ The earth is but one country and mankind its citizens.” -Baha’I Writings

Founded 177 years ago, the Baha’i Faith is an independent world religion with over five million followers in more than 200 countries and territories. The global scope of the Faith is mirrored in the composition of its membership, representing a cross-section of humanity from virtually every national, ethnic and religious background.

The Faith’s Founder, Baha’u’llah, was a Persian nobleman who Baha’i’s believe is the latest of God’s messengers to humanity. He announced that the age of global peace promised in all of the world’s religions must be based on a number of fundamental principles. These include the full equality between women and men, the elimination of all forms of racism and prejudice, the unfettered pursuit of knowledge, the elimination of the extremes of poverty and of wealth, universal education, harmony between the spiritual and material dimensions of civilization, a commitment of serving the wider community and the establishment of a world commonwealth bound by the principle of collective security. Around the world today Baha’i’s are working alongside like-minded people dedicating themselves to learning how to apply these spiritual and social teachings for the betterment of the world.

2. Moderator;

Ms. Maria-Luisa Chavez, Chief of the NGO Relations Cluster  
In the Department of Public Information.

3. Speakers;

Dr. Thomas Uthup, Research and Education Manager for the  
United Nations Alliance of Civilizations.

Mr. Kenneth E. Bowers, Secretary of the National Spiritual  
Assembly of the Baha’is of the United States.

Ms. Bani Dugal, Principal Representative of the Baha’i  
Internal Community to the United Nations.

Mr. Ming Hwee Chong, Representative of the Baha’i  
Internal Community to the United Nations.

4. The moderator, Ms. Maria-Luisa Chavez, introduced each of the speakers with their backgrounds. She indicated that this week’s briefing is the latest in our series focusing on efforts to promote greater understanding of inter-religious and inter-cultural dialogue in support of the United Nations founding principle of promoting international peace and security.

The “Focus on Faith” series explores a variety of faiths, such as the Baha’i, to reveal common values promoting understanding, tolerance and friendship among human beings regardless of religious beliefs, culture or language. The hope that this discussion will support a new understanding of the Baha’i Faith that helps us to better explore themes of coexistence, tolerance and mutual understanding of the lifestyles and the spiritual practices of others.

5. A film was shown. The original founder of the religion passed away in 1891. The film showed the new buildings introduced by the Baha'i Faith. The film showed on-going programs in the Central African Republics and described the educational programs. The Baha'i religion and faith continues today with their focus on peace and education.

6. The first speaker, Dr. Thomas Uthup, Currently manages an on-line portal on Education about Religions and Beliefs and a Research Network. Dr. Uthup's academic focus is on the complex relationships between culture and society, with special attention given to the religious factors affecting political behavior.

He holds a Bachelor of Arts degree in Economics, Politics and Sociology from Bangalore University In Bangalore, India, a Masters in International Journalism from Baylor University in Waco, Texas and a Master's and a Ph. D in Political Science from Binghamton University in New York. Dr. Uthup has taught at Binghamton University in New York and the College of Wooster in Ohio, He has also been a guest lecturer at Oberlin College in Ohio and Cornell University in New York. He has published in well over ninety newspapers and journals. He has also served as a panelist on National Public Radio's "Talk of the Nation" and has had several television interviews.

He showed us a film of the construction of a new building for Baha' i in his community. He also summarized a United Nations overview by the Secretary-General. He indicated that this was of theoretical importance because of the lack of understanding of the Baha'i Faith and their religion and peace. And the role of the faith based and inspired by their organizations.

Dr. Uthup summarized the work of UNAOC as an alliance to the Baha'i Faith and projects that they have conducted together.. He indicated thaty it was important to engage the media and to train religious journalists. We must simulate innovation at the grassroots. We must provide space for discussion of religious faith.

7.The second speaker, Mr. Kenneth E. Bowers, prior to being elected to the National Spiritual Assembly of the Baha'is, he served as an appointed member of the National Teaching Committee. This is the principle arm of the National Assembly. He acted as its Secretary for nearly ten years. Until 1991, Mr. Bowers owned and operated a business in Atlanta. He is the author of "God Speaks Again", an introductory book about the Baha'i Faith.

In his presentation he dwelt on the history and teaching of the Baha'i Faith. He stated the need for a global effort to advance both faith and civilization. Baha'i taught that there is one god. He indicated that Baha'i expressed the equality of women and men and the elimination of all forms of prejudice. Mr. Bowers stated that the time has come to establish world peace. The Baha'i leader served under persecution. There are estimated to be 5 - 6 million in the Baha'i religion worldwide. They have their own calender..

They now have no leader but all members of the Baha'i Faith must together achieve the goal of well being. He ended by again stating that all the people of the world together must achieve peace and advance and advance their principal of achievement.

8. The third speaker, Ms. Bani Dugal, is the President of the NGO Committee on Freedom of Religion or Belief. She is also Co-Convener of the NGO Working Group on United Nations Access, Co=Convener of the Gender Equality Architecture Reform network, as well as a past Chair of the NGO Committee on the Status of Women. She has also served as the Chair of the Global Forum of the NGO Committee on UNICEF. She is also a member of the Steering Committee of the NGO Committee on UNICEF's Working Group on Girls, A Convener of the NGO Committee on UNIFEM, and a Convener of the Advocates for African Food Security

Prior to joining the Baha'i International Community's Office in New York in 1994, Ms. Dugal practiced law before the Supreme Court of India and assisted many indigent women through her work with the Legal Aid Society of India. After relocating to the United States, she worked for the New York State Department of Environmental. Ms. Dugal holds an LL.M in environmental Law from Pace University School of Law in New York and an LL.B from the University of Delhi in India.

Ms. Dugal shared with us the work of the Baha'i religion. Baha'i seeks to break down barriers that lead to freedom of religion. She urges the World Leaders to pursue justice for all. She believes that Baha'i leaders present a clear vision of the world. Unity cannot be achieved without peace for all. She indicated that Baha'i representatives participated in 1945 on the United Nations charter. Ms. Dugal stated that they have representatives around the world and an office in Geneva. The Baha'i communities around the world work on creating peace, liberation and equality for all peoples.

Men and women are created equal. In 1947 they presented a Human Rights document to the United Nations. She stated that we must create an attitude for peace, welfare and education for everyone. She ended by stating that the day will come when the world will establish peace and recognize Human Rights for everyone.

9. The last speaker, Mr. Ming Hwee Chong, prior to coming to the United Nations led business development for various organizations including an IT firm, a start-up specializing in mobile technologies, and a global consultancy. Mr. Chong has served as a facilitator for inter-faith/inter-ethnic dialogues in Singapore and has led service projects to Cambodia and Timor Leste.

He believes that everyone has the capacity to take charge of their own spiritual, social and intellectual development and is actively involved in community building efforts to help raise this capacity. Mr Chong holds a BA in Computing from the National University of Singapore. While there he was selected for an 18-month entrepreneurial stint in Silicone Valley that included programs at the Stanford Center for Professional Development.

Mr. Chong indicated that there are two kinds of people, word wise and other wise. He stated that we should let hearts burn with loving kindness. A month ago he established an education for children on peace, freedom and no prejudices. He feels that this education will create both awareness and kindness. This social experiment is being expanded around the world.

10. A film was shown with each speaker to explain their comments with examples. Each one of us are a protagonist to make the world a better place for everyone.

11. Questions/Answers:

11.1 Mr. Ming Hwee Chong; Technology is important in our world. We must ask ourselves why are we using these technologies?

11.2 Ms. Bani Dugal; One of the principles of Baha'i is to have a common language for all people.

11.3 Dr. Thomas Uthup; It is up to Civil Society and individuals to do this interfaith. In India they have set up groups to talk with each other about these problems and to understand their differences and focus on commonality.

11.4 Ms. Maria-Luisa Chavez; We need to be more divisive. We are working on a common cause. They need our help to make a difference at the United Nations.

11.5 Ms. Bani Dugal; She has seen how Member States address the needs of people. We should write letters on this important issue to the Secretary-General and to our United Nations Representatives.

11.6 Ms. Maria-Luisa Chavez; We must follow up on this important declaration with additional letters to all member states. Just sending letters to the Security Council is not enough. They must be sent to everyone and followed up.

11.7 Dr. Thomas Uthup; His organization has established media sites to forward these letters and ideas. This media must be available around the world. Columbia University in New York is setting up a meeting to discuss these issues.

11.8 Ms. Bani Dugal; Medias around the world are starting to address these issues. We are sending out messages to the media and they are going out.

11.9 Mr. Ming Hwee Chong; He asked the question what kind of media is going out. We must use both media and the social media to present these issues.

11.10 Mr. Kenneth Bowers; We are now starting to present these issues around the world. Also his organization is now starting to present these issues. We must have young people to discuss these important issues.

11.11 Mr. Kenneth Bowers; Becoming a Baha'i does not mean that you have to abandon your religion.

11.12 Mr. Ming Hwee Chong; We must go back to our scriptures to present our beliefs.

11.13 Ms. Bani Dugal; It is only a matter of time before the United Nations changes their focus.

11.14 Dr. Thomas Uthop; We cannot expect Member States to change their views.. It must start with the people then Member states will be forced to change their views on these issues.

11.15 Ms. Maria-Luisa Chavez; We have to pressure all the Member States on these important issues.

11.16 Ms. Bani Dugal; There have been by the Baha'i on these issues.

11.17 Mr. Kenneth Bowers; Baha'i believes in supporting Human Rights. It brings all people together.

11.18 Ms. Bani Dugal; Baha'i people are persecuted around the world. The Baha'i people believe in the freedom of religion. They work at the United Nations to combat their persecution. There are many instances of Baha'i people being persecution.

PDC George Weinstein  
National UN Chairman