

Global Peace Services USA

...an idea whose time has come

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Greetings from John Eriksson, President, GPS USA.

The first article in this issue of the GPS Newsletter describes a unique interfaith institution in the Washington, DC area. The author, Dr. Sovan Tun, a member of the GPS Board, has been a long-standing supporter and member of the Interfaith Council of Metropolitan Washington (IFC). Dr. Tun traces the evolution, structure and governance, program and activities, and contributions to peace of this highly regarded institution. The IFC was founded over forty years ago and has expanded to include a total of eleven faith communities, namely Baha'i, Buddhist, Hindu, Islamic, Jain, Jewish, Mormon, Protestant, Roman Catholic, Sikh, and Zoroastrian. The IFC Executive Directors over the years have played a key role in expanding membership and deepening its programs.

The author identifies ten specific, recurring IFC activities, ranging from a Unity Walk, Interfaith Concert, Interfaith Dinner Dialogue, Interfaith Leadership Summit, Interfaith Speakers Bureau, to Resources for Educational Materials.

Dr. Tun observes that:

“IFC participates with faith communities in a collective action in response to hate crimes or social injustice. It distributes an Emergency Services Directory to help the community in case of hunger or sickness. These activities strengthen relationships among faiths and advance justice in neighborhoods. Strong faith relationships create trust between communities.”

For more information on these and other IFC Program Activities, as well as contact information, please consult the article below.

The second article continues the work of GPS Board Member Dr. Robert Muscat in his analysis of the mixed blessings of construction of dams and hydroelectric power installations along major rivers flowing through developing countries. This article updates the attempts by the riparian countries of the Mekong River Basin to coordinate their efforts so as to minimize adverse effects downstream (Cambodia, Thailand and Vietnam) of infrastructure construction upstream (China and Laos). The author notes that the data-sharing agreement of a recent Chinese inspired multi-country mechanism (Lancang-Mekong) has been off to a weak start. However, Thailand decided against a Chinese proposal to dredge a 90-km river stretch, in order to facilitate river traffic.

Dr. Muscat also assesses the challenges to peace posed by an almost decade-long effort by Ethiopia to construct what will be the largest hydroelectric installation in Africa along the “Blue Nile” before it joins the “White Nile” in Sudan. In recent years Egyptian concerns about adverse effects of Ethiopian river control have grown in bellicosity, even to the threat of war. The author observes that US efforts in the past two years to nudge negotiations towards agreements acceptable to Egypt and Sudan have not succeeded.

While acknowledging that hydro power has obvious environmental advantages over thermal-powered electricity generation, Dr. Muscat points out that harnessing rivers can also be seriously detrimental to the environment. However, he argues that adverse effects could be managed through negotiation, design flexibility to meet stakeholder needs (e.g. NGOs to represent interests of powerless small farmer stakeholders), and good-faith water-flow management.

In order to continue and expand our current work, such as the GPS Newsletter, so that we can continue putting out our newsletter, with essays and articles readers are unlikely to find elsewhere and hold special events, such as the 2019 discussion of the Colombia Peace Process, we do need greater resources. Please consider making as generous a tax-deductible contribution as you can to GPS. This may be done by mailing a check to the postal address shown above or through our website www.globalpeaceservices.org. Phone: 301-681-6968.

Interfaith Council of Metropolitan Washington: History, Program, Work for Peace

The organization was originally known as the InterFaith Conference of Metropolitan Washington. Its name was amended in 2018 as follows: “The name of this corporation shall be the InterFaith Conference of Metropolitan Washington, Inc. (hereafter referred to as ‘the Conference’). The corporation may do business as the Interfaith Council of Metropolitan Washington.” This article uses the name “Interfaith Council” or “IFC” throughout.

I became involved with the IFC in September 2005 when Buddhists were admitted as observers. Noting that the Buddhist tradition was not a member of the IFC, some Buddhists of Asian and Western communities in the Washington DC area created the Washington Buddhist Network (WBN), in which I served as Vice President, as an umbrella organization of Buddhist groups in the area. After a year of observer status, WBN became a full-pledged member of the IFC.

Historic Highlights

IFC was founded in 1978 by the Protestant, Roman Catholic, Jewish, and Islamic communities. Since then, it has expanded to now include a total of eleven faith communities, namely Baha’i, Buddhist, Hindu, Islamic, Jain, Jewish, Mormon, Protestant, Roman Catholic, Sikh, and Zoroastrian. The Buddhist faith is the faith community which has most recently joined the IFC.

The mission of IFC is officially stated as follows: “IFC’s mission is to create an inclusive community of diverse faiths in our nation’s capital that is focused on the values that unite us and the distinctions that make each faith unique.”

IFC’s By-Laws have undergone three amendments since its creation 42 years ago. The first amendment in 2015 was related to the Assembly whose role was the highest authoritative body of IFC as stated

in Article V Section 3a of the By-Laws. Also, the Assembly had the authority to amend and alter the By-Laws according to the Board of Directors Article VIII. The authority of the Assembly was amended to be transitioned to the Board of Directors as the governance body of the IFC.

The second amendment in 2015 was related to Article II about the purposes of IFC. In Section 1(d), the organization's original purpose was stated as follows: "to be a symbol of unity in a broken and divided world, recognizing both the diversity and the independence of faiths seeking to do God's work." The Section 1 (d) was amended with the new language: "to be a symbol of unity in a broken and divided world, recognizing both the diversity and the independence of faiths seeking to serve humanity and, according to the beliefs of many faiths, to do God's work."

The third amendment took place in 2018 when the name of the organization was called "Interfaith Council of Metropolitan Washington," (IFC), as explained above.

Rev. Dr. Clark Lobenstine became IFC's first Executive Director when IFC was created in 1978. He managed the organization from 1979 through 2014, an exceptionally long tenure for an executive director of a non-profit organization. He was an internationally acclaimed interfaith leader. Especially in the Washington DC area (District of Columbia, Maryland, Virginia), he was called to participate or help organize many interfaith events. IFC was expanded to include other religious faiths in addition to the Abrahamic traditions under Dr. Lobenstine's leadership. He passed away, much mourned, on October 15, 2018.

Upon the retirement of Rev. Dr. Lobenstine in 2014, Rabbi Gerry Serotta took over the position of IFC Executive Director on July 1, 2014. Rabbi Serotta was recognized for having played a leading role in the issues of interfaith, human rights, and social justice in the Washington area. Rabbi Serotta took his retirement on August 31, 2020 after six years at the helm of the IFC.

Rev. Dr. David Lindsey became the third Executive Director on July 1, 2020. With his experience as clergy of the United Church of Christ engaging in several interfaith dialogues and interacting with different faiths, Rev. Lindsey is expected to lead IFC to a better understanding of diverse religious faiths and to a collaboration of all faiths to work together for improvement of the quality of life of all people.

Program of Activities

To meet the mission and to reach the purposes of IFC, several activities are undertaken on a regular basis or on an annual basis. Under the first Executive Director, Rev. Dr. Clark Lobenstine, all activities were grouped into three centers, namely InterFaith Center for Advancing Justice, InterFaith Center for Building Community, and InterFaith Center for Nurturing Understanding. Under the second Executive Director, Rabbi Gerry Serotta, a project called WIROC (Washington Interfaith Response and Outreach Coalition) was created to encompass all IFC activities related to engagement of faith communities and individuals. Major activities are summarized as follows:

- Emergency Services Directory – IFC annually updates a searchable database on about 400 direct social services providers in the Metropolitan Washington area.
- MLK Birthday Service – IFC annually sponsors a multifaith service to commemorate the birthday of Rev. Martin Luther King and to observe MLK Day designated as a national day of service encouraging all Americans to volunteer for community improvements.
- Unity Walk – IFC sponsors an annual walk in September along Washington DC's Embassy Row to demonstrate unity and solidarity among walkers from different faiths.

- Bridge Builder Award – IFC celebrates its annual award to recognize religious leaders for their achievements in interfaith work.
- Interfaith Concert – IFC celebrates as an annual fundraiser the sacred songs, dances, and chants provided and cherished by different faith communities.
- Collaboration with Interfaith Power and Light (IPL) – IFC supports IPL in working with congregations of all faiths in the Washington area to save energy, go green, and respond to climate change.
- Interfaith Leadership Summit – IFC provides a one-day dialogue on an annual basis among young leaders in the Washington area.
- Interfaith Dinner Dialogue – IFC supports interfaith dinner dialogues among different faith neighbors of the Washington area.
- Resources for educational materials – IFC serves as a source of materials for learning about a faith or making available education materials for purchase or borrowing from its library.
- Interfaith Speaker’s Bureau – IFC provides speakers on a variety of topics including interfaith relations, theology, religious practice, ethics, and interfaith dialogue.
- Others – IFC provides support and assistance to individuals or communities in response to hate crimes and other acts destroying the united voices of different faiths, or other activities deemed important for interfaith works.

Contribution to Peace

All the activities undertaken by the Interfaith Council of Metropolitan Washington aim to contribute to building peace among people and communities. Many studies have been made and many events have been held regarding religion as a

peacebuilding tool. Some of IFC’s contributions are summarized below.

Religion has a dual legacy: conflict and peace. Religion can be the issue as the cause of war, and conflicts can be removed through religion. However, every religious faith always talks about peace and never about war. Therefore, whatever the causes of conflicts, interfaith dialogues are the symbols of peace.

Conflicts arise from causes due to differences in culture, traditional belief, behavior, or attitude. Peacebuilding is a complex and dynamic process of addressing these conflicts by rebuilding understanding or trust of other faiths. Each faith has its own symbols, scriptures, texts, rituals, etc. Only dialogues between people from different faith communities can dispel any negative perceptions and stereotypes and transform enemy images.

Another important and effective tool to break down stereotypes and promote understanding is through educational materials, lectures, speakers, trainings, and workshops. All educational materials on each faith can be obtained from IFC.

Even though they are not formal interactions, dialogues may include casual interactions through joint concerts, dances, art exhibitions, and other performances. IFC organizes and provides an Interfaith Concert every year with participation of different faiths along with Tastes of Faith, comprising food and dessert provided by faith communities.

IFC participates with faith communities in a collective action in response to hate crimes or social injustice. It distributes an Emergency Services Directory to help the community in case of hunger or sickness. These activities strengthen relationships among faiths and advance justice in neighborhoods. Strong faith relationships create trust between communities.

The Unity Walk is another way to strengthen relationships among faith communities. It takes place in September each year to commemorate the anniversary of the 9/11 terrorist attack perpetrated

in 2001. Along the walk, participants can stop at different houses of worship and learn about their faiths. This walk demonstrates the diversity of faiths and their ability to work together and to live in tolerance and harmony.

For more information about the educational materials and activities of the IFC, please consult the IFC website – www.ifcmw.org, contact the organization by telephone at 202-234-6300 or email at ifc@ifcmw.org.

✿ Sovan Tun

Water and Peace

Our February 2020 Newsletter included an article on the “harnessing” of the Mekong River. We briefly traced the history of this ambitious multi-country, multi-purpose, internationally conceived and sponsored program, originally designed in the 1950s to enhance Southeast Asian peace. The designers expected that jointly developing the potentialities of this mighty river and its tributaries, for electric power, irrigation, and transportation, would help bind together the four Lower Basin countries – Laos, Cambodia, Thailand and Vietnam, thereby cementing long-term regional peace. The program would be planned and coordinated by an internationally-assisted consultation system. For many years this vision was on hold, overtaken by the Vietnam War and related civil wars, and hobbled by conflicting interests of the riparian states. Once the wars were resolved, the vision began to be realized, with the original four countries later joined by upstream China and Myanmar (Burma).

Unfortunately, as the article pointed out, the very success of the multitude of engineering works – dams, power grids, and irrigation channels on tributaries and on the main-stem -- has brought on several unforeseen problems we discuss below, causing substantial new tensions and conflicts of interest, both within and between the countries. While armed conflict over these issues does not seem likely, maintaining regional harmony (aside from the threats to the health of the river and to the livelihoods of many communities dependent upon it) needs urgent attention.

Addressing these needs is further complicated by the wider conflicts of interest surrounding the region -- overlapping claims of sovereignty over islands; US-China tensions; off-shore drilling rights competition, etc.

GPS recently participated in a conference sponsored by the Global Water Alliance, the Peace Engineering program at Drexel University, and the Water Center at the University of Pennsylvania on the subject of Water and Peace. (Planned to take place at Drexel, the conference instead, due to COVID-19, was conducted virtually.) The Mekong problems we sketched at the conference have deepened in the few months since our earlier article.

This year, for the second year in a row, the region remains in the grip of an unprecedented drought that has heightened tensions and increased media coverage of the river’s low-flow problems. The technical complexity of the interaction of multiple factors – timing and volume of water releases from upstream dams; reduced siltation deposits in the delta; deleterious effects of reduced river flow on the extraordinary fisheries of the Cambodian lake (the Tonle Sap); seawater intrusion into the delta in Vietnam; fish reduction in the main stem; and enforced population resettlement – makes the current controversies over the river’s engineering works especially challenging. In addition, the differences in national interest between the countries involved are proving to be beyond the harmonizing capability of the intergovernmental

consultation arrangements. For China and Laos, the economic benefits from further hydroelectric development outweigh the increased threats to downstream populations and communities. The two countries also have been denying responsibility for present or potential harmful effects, arguing that their management of water flow from their dams has been dependable and cognizant of down-stream interests. In contrast, critics cite China's eleven upstream dams as having withheld half of the river's flow in 2019, greatly worsening the effects of the downstream drought.

A major bone of contention is the Xayaburi (pronounced Chayaburi) hydro project in Laos. Xayaburi is a so-called run-of-the-river (no storage) dam. It is located on a tributary of the Mekong,

different from the series of upstream main-stem Chinese dams which are based on large water storage reservoirs. Besides the water-flow issues, there is debate over detrimental effects of the dam's sediment control gates and fish ladders. Xayaburi is also marked by intense disputes among many stakeholders - governments, project management authorities, farmers (claiming they have received insufficient compensation for their drowned lands), fishermen, NGOs, university engineering faculties, and "activists."

While Cambodia announced in March, 2020, that it would build no new hydro dams on the main stem for 10 years, Laos has reiterated its determination to move ahead with its next large, highly controversial, main-stem project, the Luang-Prabang dam.

Ground-breaking is likely in the next few months. There has been a litany of complaints over the failure of Laos to take adequate account of the concerns raised by Cambodia and Vietnam. Some projections show truly crippling effects on the agriculture and livability of Vietnam's Mekong Delta region, and on Cambodia's major fishery resources. Furthermore, Laos plans on constructing many more dams to realize its touted potential as the hydroelectric "Battery of Southeast Asia." Clearly, the coordinating machinery that has taken decades to put in place has not been robust enough to ensure the long-term harmonization vision.

Meanwhile, a rival regional coordinating mechanism inspired by China, called Lancang-Mekong Cooperation, has started meeting. The Lancang-Mekong area includes both the lower and upper (mainly



Chinese) stretches of the river. The original coordinating mechanism, now dubbed the Mekong River Commission, embraced only the four Lower Basin countries. The data-sharing and general coordination requirements under Lancang-Mekong are even weaker and less comprehensive than those called for under the Commission. China did strike a positive note at the Lancang-Mekong meeting just concluded in August, 2020, offering to provide the riparian countries with a continuous and complete flow of upstream hydrological data. It should also be noted that despite China's outsized position in the whole region, there has been some pushback. For example, Thailand recently decided against a Chinese proposal to dynamite rocks and then dredge a 90-km stretch of the river, in order to facilitate river traffic by larger ships. The Thai Government was responding to domestic pressures against the project.

Another water-based challenge to regional peace is developing on the Nile River in Africa. Initiated in 2011, Ethiopia has been building what will be the largest hydro project on the continent, the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD). Of the two riparian countries below the dam, Sudan and Egypt, the latter especially has been raising red flags for several years, voicing strong objections to the risks it sees the dam posing to the river and to Egypt's vital interests. Recurrent negotiations have failed to resolve the issues (mainly regarding Egypt's role in the dam's flow management). US efforts in the past two years to nudge negotiations towards agreements acceptable to Egypt and Sudan have not succeeded.

There is no standing inter-country coordinating arrangement for the GERD project, nor any UN-

sponsored consultative machinery in place, that might be more effective for resolving the issues than recurrent ad hoc negotiations. The rhetoric the impasse has inspired has surpassed in belligerence anything known to have emerged in the case of the Mekong. At one point in October 2019, the Egyptian foreign minister was reported to have threatened that if Ethiopia failed to reach a satisfactory agreement on Egypt's participation in flow management during periods of drought or flooding, his country would be willing to go to "war" to stop the dam's construction. While the threat may be a negotiating tactic at this stage, it does reflect the seriousness of the problem and the gravity of Egyptian interests at stake.

From an environmental perspective, hydro power has obvious advantages over coal or gas-fired electricity generation. On the other hand, harnessing rivers can also be seriously detrimental to the environment, in different ways, as we have noted.

However, the hydro downsides could be managed through effective negotiation, design flexibility to meet the needs of stakeholders, and good-faith water-flow management. NGOs that represent the interests of unorganized and/or powerless stakeholders (like small farmers) should be included in negotiations and in management oversight. Planning, construction, data sharing, and equitable management may also be more transparent and harmonious if conducted under the auspices of UN or regional good offices.

✿ Robert J. Muscat

Global Peace Services USA

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