

Madrid Statement on ASEM Interfaith Dialogue

We, the representatives of ASEM partners, representing various cultural, religious and civilizational heritages, gathered in Madrid on 7-8 April 2010 at the Sixth ASEM Interfaith Dialogue, under the theme of “The Consolidation of Religious Freedom and Mutual Knowledge of Societies through Interreligious and Intercultural Dialogue” and discussed the ways to promote respect for diversity, mutual knowledge and freedom of religion and beliefs. We underscored the importance of its mission and agreed on the following to further advance the ASEM Interfaith Dialogue.

1. We noted that at the Ninth ASEM Foreign Ministers' Meeting, the Ministers recognized and expressed their support for various intercultural and interfaith dialogues within the framework of ASEM as advocating respect for values such as solidarity, tolerance, human rights and freedom.
2. We renewed our commitment to consolidate further the Interfaith Dialogue that has been making a significant contribution to the enrichment of Asian and European cultures and faiths as well as the deepening of Asia-Europe relations. We reaffirmed the Bali Declaration, the Larnaca Action Plan, the Nanjing Statement, the Amsterdam Statement and the Seoul Statement, and appreciated the progress made so far through them all.
3. Under the theme of “The Consolidation of Religious Freedom and Mutual Knowledge of Societies through Interreligious and Intercultural Dialogue”, we discussed ways to enhance the role of ASEM Interfaith Dialogue in reconciling religious, cultural and social differences through the development of an effective public communication strategy and implementation of the Dialogue's recommended action items.
4. We noted that many communities across the world are becoming increasingly culturally and religiously diverse. We underlined that social stability and cohesion in diverse communities can be enhanced

significantly through the promotion of interfaith dialogues. We stressed on the need to respect religious freedom as a fundamental human right.

5. We recognized that the growing interaction among people with different cultural and religious backgrounds in the era of globalization has brought about both opportunities and challenges. We underlined that mutual knowledge should be increased as a way both to enrich our understanding and to better know each other.
6. We recognized that the lack of interreligious and intercultural tolerance, understanding and respect can often lead to tensions and conflicts between different cultures and faiths. Interfaith and intercultural dialogues need to be promoted further in order to enhance mutual understanding and respect as well as to foster peaceful co-existence and prosperity among diverse cultures and religions.
7. We recognized that various initiatives on interfaith and intercultural dialogues at the national, regional and international levels are mutually reinforcing and contributing to each other. We noted that a number of such initiatives are being taken forward in regional and international fora such as UNESCO, Alliance of Civilizations, the Tripartite Forum on Interfaith Cooperation for Peace, the Ministerial Meeting on Interfaith Dialogue and Cooperation for Peace, Churches, Mosques, Universities and the UN General Assembly, through its resolutions on the promotion of interreligious and intercultural dialogue for peace, cooperation and understanding. In this regard, we welcome general Assembly Resolution A/RES/63/181 on the elimination of all forms of intolerance and of discrimination based on religion or belief, General Assembly Resolution A/RES/64/81 on the promotion of interreligious and intercultural understanding, harmony and cooperation and General Assembly Resolution A/RES/64/14 on the Alliance of Civilizations.
8. We welcomed the Alliance of Civilizations' efforts to facilitate dialogue and cooperation among diverse cultures and civilizations including at their Second Forum held in Istanbul, Turkey the 6th and 7th of April 2009 and at the Third Forum, that will be held, in some weeks time, in Rio de Janeiro, Brasil, from the 27th to the 29th of May. In the same spirit, we also welcomed Indonesia's initiative to host the ASEM Interfaith/Intercultural Retreat for Religious Leaders in Yogyakarta, on 9-12 September 2009, and its initial conclusion underscoring the important roles of the religious leaders in promoting tolerance and harmony in multi-religious/ multicultural societies and the Special Non

Aligned Movement Ministerial Meeting on Interfaith Dialogue for peace, cooperation and development held in Manila 16-18 March 2010.

9. We underlined that the promotion of intercultural and interfaith dialogues and the peaceful and harmonious co-existence of different religions and cultures contribute significantly to the maintenance of international peace and security. We renewed our commitment to help combating extremism and terrorism and upholding international peace and security.
10. We recognized that interfaith dialogues contribute to easing public concerns and achieving social cohesion. We noted that sharing common values through such forum helps illustrate that the bonds which connect us as a global society far outweigh those differences which can drive us apart.
11. We reaffirmed our commitment to upholding, promoting and protecting the rights of individuals, including the rights to freedom of expression, freedom of thought, conscience, and religion or belief, as expressed in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.
12. In the working group on Religious Freedom and Human Rights, we recognized freedom of religion and belief, and freedom of religious expression – two sides of the same coin – as fundamental human rights, that should be protected by the governments of all ASEM partners.
13. Governments have the responsibility to protect the freedom of all religions, majority and minority. We call on governments to ensure the free exercise of freedom of religion and belief.
14. At the same time, we recognized that differences exist between cultures and religions in the interpretation of religious freedom and the freedom of expression. We are mindful of the fact that there still remain areas and issues where we have to agree to disagree and further dialogue is needed. And we must not allow differences to spill over into violent speech or actions.
15. Acknowledging existing differences underlines the vital importance of an on- going interfaith dialogue as a way to mutual understanding and respect, and as a constant reminder that while fostering the freedom of

expression as a human right, we must at the same time be aware of the responsibility not to harm or insult the feeling of others. Freedom and responsibility always go hand in hand.

16. We welcomed the opportunity to deepen our mutual understanding through an in depth discussion of religious freedom and the freedom of expression. We strongly recommend that this dialogue among religions should be continued in each ASEM country, facilitated by the respective governments. When undertaking an interfaith dialogue one should take into account that true dialogue is more than an exchange of opinions, but requires knowledge of one's own and each others past. It also demands a willingness to explore ways to a future where there can be diversity in harmony.

Respect

17. In the Working Group on Respect and Mutual Knowledge, we recognized the fact that promotion of Respect and Mutual Knowledge among people of different faiths and cultures is necessary to achieve harmony within all societies. We acknowledge that in a world confronted with enormous challenges, there should be concerted effort and cooperation in order to progress in interfaith dialogue. The group recommends the following actions:
 18. To encourage and promote education at all levels so that differences and diversity can be understood and appreciated, and mutual respect may be established among different groups of societies and communities;
 19. To reiterate our common commitment to defend human dignity by working towards alleviating poverty, minimizing illiteracy, curbing injustice, ensuring equal rights and opportunities for cultural and religious minorities, etc.;
 20. To broaden the dialogue among leaders of cultural and religious groups to reach the general public, enhancing mutual understanding, thus helping to avoid misunderstandings and conflicts, religious or otherwise and emphasise that the media has an indispensable role in helping to reduce prejudices and effectively bring interfaith dialogue to the broader public.

21. In this regard, we recognize the importance of encouraging the implementation of proposals of the 8th ASEF Journalists' Colloquium, "Youth, Media and Interfaith: Sharing Knowledge, Building Trust", held in Madrid 5-6 April 2010 meant to assist governments, religious groups and the media to promote respect and mutual knowledge.
22. In the Working Group on 'Interfaith and Intercultural Dialogue as a Bridge between Societies,' we recognized the fact that interfaith and intercultural dialogue is not an end in itself but a means to build a more peaceful and harmonious world; acknowledged that the aim of interfaith dialogue is not to convert one another but to deepen our respect for one another's faiths, to discover our common grounds, and to learn from and be enriched by our diversity; realized that dialogue can serve as a universal tool for the resolution of religious and cultural conflicts as well as inter-religious and intra-religious differences, while taking cognizance of the threats posed by extremism and terrorism; and appreciated the role that dialogue can play in our joint efforts to discover the values that we hold in common.
23. In view thereof, we have resolved to recommend to our respective peoples and governments the pursuit of the following concrete paths:
24. To encourage existing centers and institutes for interfaith dialogue as well as push for the further establishment of similar venues, where those who work or intend to work in this area can receive further training; have the opportunity to share with and learn from one another's experiences and expertise; conduct studies and researches, and disseminate their findings to the broader public through print and the other channels of the mass media;
25. To promote the setting up of interfaith fora at all levels, including the international, national and local community levels, and involve as many participants as possible, including in particular opinion makers, the youth and women in such fora;
26. To support the creation of exchange programs whereby educators, students and scholars of one faith can study alongside the adherents of other faiths and familiarize themselves with the tenets and practices of different faiths in order to promote religious literacy; and

27. To propose mechanisms that would enable and inspire people of different faiths, to participate, in some way, in the others' religious festivities and observe the others' religious traditions, without compromising their own beliefs.

28. We congratulate the Kingdom of Spain and the Islamic Republic of Pakistan for successfully co-hosting the Sixth ASEM Interfaith Dialogue. We express our appreciation to the Republic of Austria, the People's Republic of China, the Kingdom of Denmark, the Republic of Finland, the Federal Republic of Germany, the Republic of Indonesia, the Italian Republic, Japan, the Republic of Korea, Malaysia, the Kingdom of the Netherlands, the Republic of the Philippines, the Republic of Poland, the Republic of Singapore, and the Kingdom of Thailand for co-sponsoring the Dialogue. We also appreciate the active participation and support given by the Asia-Europe Foundation (ASEF) and the attendance of Australia and the Russian Federation as guests of the Chair.

29. We appreciate the fact that the Republic of the Philippines is seriously considering the hosting of the 7th ASEM Interfaith Dialogue and will communicate its decision within the following weeks.

Annex



8th ASEF Journalists' Colloquium

Youth, Media and Interfaith:
Sharing Knowledge, Building Trust

In conjunction with the 6th ASEM Interfaith Dialogue

5-6 April 2010 | Madrid/Toledo, Spain



CASA ASIA

7 April 2010

The media greatly influence the level of trust and mutual understanding among religious groups. In view of this, the Asia-Europe Foundation (ASEF) has been engaging journalists on interfaith issues since 2005. In September 2009, the 7th Journalists' Colloquium in Seoul recommended that the younger generation be drawn into the conversation. Accordingly, the 8th ASEF Journalists' Colloquium on 5-6 April 2010 brought together 15 young journalists and religious leaders from Asia and Europe for a two-day dialogue in partnership with Casa Asia in Madrid.

The participants reported that their respective societies face different challenges. Some societies suffer a history of religious-related violence; others enjoy religious peace, but may be letting minority groups be marginalised through neglect and ignorance. While their experiences differed, however, all societies need urgently to address the communication challenges associated with religious diversity.

Even as participants tried to find ways for journalists and religious leaders to improve communication around religious issues, they stressed that they often faced major political and social obstacles outside of their control. Two particular problems were highlighted. First, some states are overly restrictive in their management of public discussion of religion, in the name of preserving stability and harmony. Second, dominant social norms and values in some populations are intolerant of difference, including of minorities within religious communities.

In such contexts, independent media need the freedom to make principled editorial decisions that may sometimes challenge the preferences of governments, religious authorities and even popular opinion. However, freedom of the press should be voluntarily exercised with a sense of social responsibility. Freedom of expression is not absolute. It has limits including the right of minorities to be protected from hate speech.

Participants acknowledged that both journalists and religious leaders had not done enough to provide a balanced and holistic picture of various religions to broader publics. This goal tends to be taken more seriously in societies emerging out of conflict. However, participants felt strongly that journalists and religious leaders should not wait for tragic wake-up calls before they start responding to the challenges of diversity. Countries now fortunate enough to enjoy religious peace have enough evidence from other countries to suggest that such stability cannot be taken for granted.

Therefore, in training and developing the next generation of journalists as well as religious leaders, the opportunity should not be missed to introduce skills and mindsets in tune with the realities of a religiously diverse planet.

The Colloquium recommended the following.

1. News media must build their own knowledge of religion in order to inform and educate the public, and at the very least to avoid circulating erroneous impressions and stereotypes about religious groups. They should recognise religion as a specialised area of coverage requiring the same depth and seriousness of coverage that they traditionally give to politics and business.

2. Conflict and controversy are integral to the definition of “hard news”, and will continue to be so. Yet, coverage of religion need not be limited to times when it makes the news for the wrong reasons. The journalistic repertoire includes not only hard news but also human interest stories, opinion columns, features, photo essays, interviews and so on. Journalists should use their full repertoire more creatively to offer more balanced and holistic coverage of religion. In many societies, people are increasingly interested in personal spiritual growth as a lifestyle. Media that under-cover this dimension of life may be missing an opportunity to increase their appeal.
3. Media should make special efforts to cover the many interfaith projects that are on-going. While these projects do not have the immediacy of hard news, interfaith projects can have positive long-term impact and deserve due attention.
4. Professional codes of ethics should include guidance on how to cover religion. At present, very few do so. The lack of ethical guidance leads to various mistakes, such being too quick to label a group by its main religion, when other dimensions of its identity may be more relevant to the story and provide better insight into a problem. Independent press councils and associations of journalists should be cultivated as vehicles for promoting better coverage of religion.
5. National and regional awards for journalistic excellence are one way in which the profession pushes for higher standards. Organisations that already give out prestigious awards, such as the Society of Publishers in Asia, should be encouraged to add a category for the coverage of religious diversity.
6. Religious groups must improve their understanding of how media work, in order to reach out more effectively to broader publics. Such training can vary from formal university programmes to short workshops, or meeting editors about the media’s practical needs and priorities.
7. Better-resourced religious groups can consider using professional public relations officers and official spokesmen to engage the media. Government organisations, universities and NGOs could help to improve the media literacy of smaller and less well-resourced religious groups in their societies.
8. The internet, including social media, is an important platform for religious groups and interfaith projects to present themselves to journalists and wider publics. Religious leaders should use this opportunity to provide clear, user-friendly information about their groups. Younger, tech-savvy members of religious groups have a special contribution to make here.
9. On-going, regular dialogues between religious groups and media are essential. Networking should take place in times of stability and calm, and not start only when there is controversy and conflict. Contact building is a standard way in which journalists and newsmakers improve the quality of coverage in other spheres. Religion should not be an exception. Third parties such as NGOs and universities could provide a neutral and trusted forum for such dialogue.

All the above steps require that media and religious groups change their prevailing mindsets. Religious leaders must recognise that the world is more crowded and connected, and that they can no longer limit their communication only to their own followers. They must make the effort to translate their interests and aspirations into universal language that others can understand, and work towards reducing the risk of provoking suspicion and misunderstanding. Media need to recognise the urgent global priority to promote a culture of tolerance of diversity, without which the foundations of social life on which they themselves depend will be threatened. While they are not obliged to promote any one religion and should remain objective and balanced in their coverage, they have a responsibility to help avoid religious conflict.