

Forum Addresses Peace and Security in South Asia

William Selig
November 4, 2015



Washington, D.C., USA—On November 4, 2015, UPF’s Office of Peace and Security Affairs in cooperation with The Commongrounds USA, held a forum at The Washington Times on “Peace and Security in South Asia.”

Forty guests attended the one-day event, including leaders of the Pakistani and Indian communities in the Washington, D.C. metro area; diplomatic representatives from the embassies of Côte d’Ivoire, Ethiopia, Gabon, and Sri Lanka; as well as friends of UPF and Ambassadors for Peace.

South Asia is confronted with many challenges, including: Al-Qaeda and Islamic extremism, unemployment and slow economic growth; lack of access to healthcare, education and water and sanitation in many areas; environmental degradation and climate change; human trafficking and illegal migration; and corruption.

Forum host, Dr. Antonio Betancourt, director of UPF’s Office of Peace and Security Affairs, in his welcoming remarks, said: “The issues impacting the nations and the people of South Asia must be solved by its own citizens, leaders and institutions. On the other hand, many of the problems that will be discussed today have global implications. They are trans-national in nature, such as climate change, poverty and refugees. In other words, what happens in South Asia has an impact here in this country and vice versa.”

Dr. Zulfiqar Kazmi and his wife, Tanvir Kazmi, who are very active in their local Pakistani community, brought many of the guests. Dr. Kazmi is the executive director of The Commongrounds USA, an organizational network dedicated to the promotion of interfaith dialogue and inter-religious cooperation.

Dr. Kazmi, in his opening remarks, acknowledged his friendship with Dr. Betancourt who had visited Pakistan as Dr. Kazmi’s guest some years ago. He introduced the forum’s panelists, Dr. Akbar Khwaja, Dr. Syed Tariq Shahab and Prof. Dr. Hassan Abbas, and thanked them for their willingness to share their knowledge, experience and visionary outlook on the forum theme.

The first speaker, Dr. Akbar Khawaja, a former Pakistan senator, who worked with the World Bank for more than 18 years, touched upon the following points in his presentation:

South Asia includes Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, the Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka.

The current territories of Bangladesh, India and Pakistan were the core of the British Empire prior to 1947.

The region is home to nearly one-fifth of the world’s population, or 1.7 billion people.

South Asia's robust economic growth has translated into improvements in human development indicators, but poverty in the region remains high with a half a billion people still living in poverty.

More than 200 million people live in slums. Many countries in the region suffer from extreme forms of social exclusion and huge infrastructure gaps.

The regional breakdown in terms of religion:

Afghanistan: Islam (99%), Hinduism, Sikhism, and Christianity (1%)

Bangladesh: Islam (89.5%), Hinduism (9.5%), Buddhism (0.7%), Christianity (0.32%)

Bhutan: Buddhism (75%), Hinduism (25%)

India: Hinduism (80.5%), Islam (13.5%), Christianity (2.3%), Sikhism (1.9%), Buddhism (0.8%), Jainism (0.4%), others (0.64%)

Maldives: Islam (100%)

Nepal: Hinduism (81.3%), Buddhism (9.0%), Islam (4.4%), Kirat (3.1%), Christianity (1.4%), others (0.8%)

Pakistan: Islam (96.28%), Hinduism (1.85%), Christianity (1.59%), others (0.22%)

Sri Lanka: Buddhism (70.19%), Hinduism (12.61%), Islam (9.71%), Christianity (7.45%)



Dr. Zulfiqar Kazmi, forum moderator,
executive director, The Commongrounds USA

Dr. Khawaja also spoke about the conflicts in Afghanistan and Pakistan, which dominate global headlines, but pointed out that parts of India, Sri Lanka and Nepal are also experiencing long-time strife. These conflicts continue to cause human misery, destruction of infrastructure and social cohesion, and human casualties.

Regarding the ongoing war in Afghanistan, there are some bright spots, most notably last year's presidential elections (in September 2014), which resulted in an agreement between Dr. Mohammad Ghani, who became president, to share power with Dr. Abdullah Abdullah, who became chief executive officer. Since the Taliban's overthrow in 2001, there have been five national elections, and women's participation in public life and government has increased dramatically. Nevertheless, serious problems remain. Many people have lost hope and are now leaving the country in huge numbers. Afghans remain

one of the world's largest refugee populations. According to unofficial Afghan government statistics, more than 80,000 have emigrated to Western and Northern Europe this year alone.

Other areas of concern addressed by Dr. Khawaja include the Pakistani Taliban (TTP), who are not the same as the Afghan Taliban; the ongoing territorial conflict over Kashmir involving the three nuclear powers (China, India and Pakistan); and the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) trade agreement with twelve nations (Australia, Brunei, Canada, Chile, Japan, Malaysia, Mexico, New Zealand, Peru, Singapore, U.S.A., and Vietnam).

He also spoke about the long-standing water dispute between Pakistan and India, which he said he hopes will be resolved in an amicable manner through the Indus Water Treaty (IWT), a treaty that addresses the sharing of waters of the Indus River between the two countries.

Dr. Khawaja spoke of the five "Ps:" People (to end poverty and hunger in all forms, and ensure dignity and equality), Planet (to protect our planet's natural resources and climate for future generations), Partnership (to implement the agenda through a solid global partnership), Prosperity (to ensure prosperous and fulfilling lives in harmony with nature), and Peace (to foster peaceful, just and inclusive societies). He referenced Goal #16 of the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) which is "to promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels."

He concluded his presentation by reading quotes of three personalities who are forever linked to South Asia, and who have made lasting contributions to humanity: Malala Yousafzai, Mother Teresa and Mahatma Gandhi.

"So let us wage a glorious struggle against illiteracy, poverty and terrorism, let us pick up our books and/or pens; they are the most powerful weapons." (Malala Yousafzai).

"We do not need guns and bombs to bring peace, we need love and compassion." (Mother Teresa)

"Nonviolence is a weapon of the strong." (Mahatma Gandhi)



In introducing the second speaker, Dr. Syed Tariq Shahab, Dr. Kazmi reminded the audience that challenges to peace and security are not only man-made; natural disasters also pose threats to peace in South Asia. Dr. Shahab, an associate professor at George Washington University, is an eminent cardiologist, and is actively involved in numerous social, humanitarian and political affairs in the U.S. and South Asia, particularly Pakistan.

In the aftermath of the massive earthquake that struck northern Pakistan, India and Afghanistan in 2005, Dr. Shahab led the first team to assist with relief work. He also led relief operations in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina, and following the 9/11 attacks on the Pentagon, he treated injured patients that were sent to the Virginia Hospital Center.

During his cardiology training at the University of Kentucky Medical Center, Dr. Shahab established the Appalachian Health Educational Campaign to help people living in the Appalachian area of eastern Kentucky. The organization hosted classes about healthy living habits at schools, clubs and churches. His editorial that “Better health will lead to greater prosperity” was published in the Lexington Herald and attracted the attention of major U.S. news outlets.

Dr. Shahab has lived in the United States for 25 years and is a U.S. citizen. He shared about his early life: he was born in Pakistan but spent time in Bangladesh, which was part of Pakistan when he was a child. His parents were from India. “It is very difficult to understand what is this arbitrary division [between Indian and Pakistan].” He recalled traveling to these nations when he was a medical student and the spirit of friendship that he experienced. “Any animosity that I felt was between the politicians and not the ordinary people.”

Dr. Shahab gave a comprehensive summary of the region’s history, beginning with the British, who ruled the Indian subcontinent between the mid-1800s and 1947, and its impact, particularly on India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Kashmir, Sri Lanka, and Burma.

Peace and security are related to population, and having the necessary resources to feed the people. Dr. Shahab said this is an area that must be carefully dealt “with a compassionate and loving heart.” He praised UPF and The Commongrounds USA for its efforts to bring harmony and to encourage a culture of peace.



Prof. Dr. Hassan Abbas, director of the South and Central Asia Program, National Defense University in Washington, D.C. Previously, Dr. Abbas served the Pakistani government in the administrations of Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto and President Pervez Musharraf, and also has a background in law enforcement. Dr. Abbas graciously asked the audience to recognize his wife, a human rights activist, who accompanied him to the forum.

He spoke about relations between the U.S. and South Asia, especially the political dynamics in Pakistan and Afghanistan.

Dr. Abbas began his presentation by asking the question: “What is the meaning of peace and security? Some policymakers and academics say it is the absence of war, or when hostilities cease, or where there is

no direct violence. As soon as the word security is heard, we think of a military force, a fighter aircraft, tanks, and police officers.”

He acknowledged the contribution of Dr. Mahbub ul Haq, the late Pakistani economist, who introduced the concept of “human security.”

Dr. Abbas said it is important to understand “what creates instability and insecurity and what is it that pushes us away from peace; only then can we understand how to get closer to [acquiring] and [establishing] peace.”

Peace is the absence of hatred, and that’s what will lead to a peaceful society. Nelson Mandela put it this way: “No one is born hating another person because of the color of his skin, or his background, or his religion. People must learn to hate, and if they can learn to hate, they can be taught to love, for love comes more naturally to the human heart than its opposite.”



He described five major trends that are pushing South Asia away from peace and security:

Increased intolerance:[Tolerance] is not only about allowing a person to do something, it is also about respect.

Civil wars and unresolved border disputes still push countries to build armies and invest in war rather than investing in a pen. It is a policy decision when a government chooses to build 30 schools or 25 police stations or an F-16 fighter aircraft. B and debates over security keep countries away from peace.

Haphazard urbanization, diminishing environmental resources and lack of access to water and sanitation: We often forget that urbanization is not only a physical activity; it also has social implications. More than half of Mumbai's population lives in slums with no access to clean water and toilets. Forty-two percent of India’s population is considered malnourished.

Low investment in education: Most school-age children in Pakistan, especially girls, have never gone to school.

Religious extremism and the rise of terrorist groups is the most serious problem pushing society away from peace and security.

Dr. Abbas outlined five strengths of South Asia that will help it address these problems:

Democracy: There is a democratic tradition and democratic characteristics in the region. As long as there is democracy, then there will be a push towards peace.

Religious harmony will derail the move towards sectarianism in South Asia, particularly Shia-Sunni sectarian fighting in Pakistan—and promote tolerance toward other faiths.

Economic growth and technological innovation have improved the living standard in certain areas. Technological innovation is a critical factor for economic growth.

Women empowerment: In terms of women leaders, South Asia compares favorably with the United States and Europe. An impressive number of women have been elected as heads of state in Sri Lanka, India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and, just last month, Nepal elected a woman president.

The arts and cultural diversity in South Asia provide a channel for the people to express their intellectual capabilities.

What can the United States as well as Americans of South Asian heritage do about the situation in this region of the world? Dr. Abbas suggests the following:

It's important for the U.S. not to impose ideas simply because these ideas have been successful in America. Agents of change that exist in the society should not be judged because they have the same accent as Americans or appear similar to us, but on the merit of the ideas themselves.

To encourage engagement and dialogue. Albert Einstein said: "Peace cannot be kept by force; it can only be achieved by understanding." Dr. Abbas praised UPF and The Commongrounds USA for providing a platform for dialogue.

Advocate religious harmony and bring faith leaders to the table.

Recognize and acknowledge that injustice creates instability and pushes away peace. Martin Luther King, Jr., said: "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere."

Dr. Abbas concluded by saying that education is very important to teaching and encouraging tolerance and harmony. Peaceful dialogue in an open and tolerant society is the best way to defeat extremism, he says, "but don't play with the hearts of people. Don't break the heart because that is where God lives. A peaceful society free of broken hearts is possible only through love and harmony."



A ceremony, where new Ambassadors for Peace were appointed, concluded the program.

Mrs. Tomiko Duggan, director of UPF's Office of Embassy Relations, and Dr. Betancourt presented Ambassadors for Peace certificates to five participants: Imam Abu Al Fazi Nahidian, director of Manassas Mosque; Mr. Mumtaz Hussain, a prestigious Pakistani-American artist; and the three panelists: Dr. Khawaja, Dr. Abbas, and Dr. Shahab.

Conclusion:

There was a consensus among the speakers that peace and security in South Asia is an urgent concern and must include an understanding of human security. Participants agreed that there is a need for more women to be represented at all levels of governance, especially in leadership positions. The role of women in the peace process, specifically in Kashmir, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka, should be recognized, and measures should be taken to safeguard women and children, who usually are the ones to suffer in conflict situations.

Participants also agreed that pursuit of economic advantage has largely replaced ideology as the driving force of foreign and military policies.

What is needed is a comprehensive regional ideology and strategy that promotes interdependence among the countries. Cooperation can begin by the nations identifying their common strengths and opportunities, such as reducing poverty and improving the quality of life for the people of South Asia.