

UPF South Asia's first Peace Talk: Rethinking South Asia's Future

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The first online "Peace Talk" webinar on May 31, 2020, sponsored by the Universal Peace Federation (UPF) of the South Asia had the theme, "Rethinking South Asia's Future in a Post Coronavirus World." There were ten speakers from six nationalities, including ministers, members of parliament, an ambassador, a police chief, the founding chancellor of a leading university and leaders of civil society. In attendance were 122 participants from throughout South and Southeast Asia.

Hon. Ek Nath Dhakal, former Minister for Peace and Reconstruction from Nepal was the moderator. After welcoming the speakers and guests, he explained the background of the South Asia Peace Initiative (SAPI) series which started fifteen years ago, in 2005. He outlined an impressive series of 20 conferences conducted in a face-to-face setting in six nations of South Asia. Due to the personal relationships among the speakers that developed, the spirit of this gathering was as much a family reunion, as a conference for serious dialogue.

Dr. Chung-sik Yong, Regional Group Chair for the UPF for Asia-Pacific from South Korea gave opening remarks. He noted that the role of the leaders at the time of a crisis when people are confused, afraid and grieving is especially important. "Let this crisis become an opportunity," he advised, "for the revival of our faith in humankind and to learn from the lessons of history. Through unity, cooperation, dialogue and compassion we can collectively overcome this momentous challenge of Covid-19."

Ambassador Krishna Rajan, former Permanent Secretary, Ministry of External Affairs from India began noting that the underlying theme in all the SAPI conferences was how to achieve the dream of democracy, peace and inclusive development. In a post-Covid world order, this is still our challenge. It has three components. The most important requirement is to change mindsets, he explained. Second, is the need to leverage new technologies for accelerated growth. Finally, he emphasized the necessity to focus on youth so that we concentrate on the future, instead of being held prisoners of the past. The corona crisis seems to have tempted us to be extremely selfish, which is seen in the revival of nationalism and has a tendency to suppress democracy. Achieving peace appears to be beyond the power of governments. Here UPF has a vital role to play, because of its very powerful tradition of emphasizing the need for caring and sharing.

Hon. Bhubaneswar Kalita, Member of Parliament, Rajya Sabha from India observed that although we now live in two worlds -- pre- and post-Covid-19 -- the countries of South Asia have similar historical backgrounds and have faced common problems together before and, with a united effort, have overcome. Peace and unity, among the South Asian countries, Hon. Kalita reminded us, have been the most pivotal and important for all. India is working to create a Covid-19 fund that would help all South Asian nations in terms of sharing research, medical equipment, and even the search for a vaccine. Concluding his remarks, he reminded the audience that peace required unity and cooperation, both to overcome the virus and the economic devastation it has caused.

Hon. Kazi Firoj Rashid, former Minister and Member of Parliament from Bangladesh began saying he has been locked down for about 80 days. The virus is a great equalizer, as even advanced nations are being challenged to fight this unseen enemy. It is as if we are powerless and need to turn to our faith in God at these times. Leaders needed to: protect their people from the virus, provide much needed food supplies, secure financial assistance against hardships faced by the jobless, and help make modern medical facilities available when needed. Opening industries, large and small, however, should be given high priority.

Hon. Seyed Ali Zahir Moulana, former Deputy Minister, Government of Sri Lanka, explained that the whole world is going through turbulent times facing the Covid-19 pandemic. It is important that we handle this situation with compassion, treating people with dignity whoever they may be. It is imperative that we work together to handle this unprecedented crisis. Likewise, in the post-Covid situation there are five things we need to keep in mind, called the five p's: the planet, the people, peace, prosperity and our partnership. In Sri Lanka, parliament has been dissolved and elections have been postponed a number of times, creating a constitutional crisis. This has been taken to the supreme court. Nevertheless, we need to champion on and mitigate the challenge together.

Prof. Mahendra P. Lama, founding Vice-Chancellor of Sikkim University from India said the expression used to describe this pandemic, drawn from Sanskrit, would be: dreadfulness and extreme uncertainty. In South Asia we have many types of borders: opened, closed, porous, barbed wired, etc., but this virus knows no borders, nor national sovereignties. Instead it has created its own borders: those who tested positive or negative, those dead or alive. This is called a nontraditional security threat, and with it, we face a new variety of instability, conflict and vulnerability. There are many predictions about the rate of recovery, but no one doubts there will be deep suffering ahead: no tourism, remittances have fallen, no exports but the need to import is still there. We have to revive regional bodies, like SAARC, to negotiate with the global economic powers. Here, NGOs like UPF, will also have a vital role to play.

Gen. Nabaraj Dhakal, former Additional Inspector General, Nepal Police, looked at the post Covid-19 from the security perspective of law and order. There will be a big economic crisis accelerated by reverse migration as workers return home. These people will be young, full of energy, frustrated and unemployed. What follows could be social violence, crime, looting, domestic violence, financial crimes, bank frauds, human trafficking, terrorism, etc. which can lead to anarchy within a country and interborder conflicts between nations. Indeed, the whole criminal justice system will also need to be reviewed. Could we create a SAARC police which coordinates, collaborates and cooperates among member states? Connecting multilaterally would be a big challenge, but also have a huge opportunity. There needs to be new law enforcement measures in place.

Mr. Santosh Kumar Paudel, Director, UPF-South Asia from Nepal expressed his heartfelt congratulations to the panelists and participants for their participation. SAPI has been an international voice helping to shape regional relationships and will now play a role in rethinking the future of South Asia in a post coronavirus age, he explained.

Questions and answers:

1. What initiative can India take to solve the Nepal-India border issue, knowing that this would be seen as a great step towards creating a peaceful bilateral environment?

Amb. Rajan: The border problem has its genesis in the legacy of history. The two countries enjoy such a unique relationship that they can resolve any problem in the spirit of mutual goodwill, understanding and accommodation. What is needed is a quiet discussion. At the level of civil society and in the media, people need to understand the issue and not be over excited about it. India could never wish Nepal ill and has Nepal's interest at heart. Hopefully, secretary-level talks will take place soon.

2. In practical terms, the role of SAARC is downsizing, the paradigm it seems is shifting to BIMSTEC. Why is the role of SAARC lagging behind, especially in the area of tourism hospitality and the aviation industry?

Prof. Lama: As an institution SAARC is 35 years old. This is the only forum where the Heads of State meet regularly and discuss issues at the regional level (not bilaterally). This summit has taken place just 18 times so far, though it was supposed to meet annually. It has not really made a significant difference in terms of South Asian development. As an institution, it has become too government-centric and the private sector has been kept outside. Unless SAARC is fully restructured, becoming more people- and community-oriented, it will not be able to do much. SAARC must be project-oriented, not government-oriented.

3. How can the role of religion help transfer conflict into peace and harmony after Covid-19? Are yoga, meditation and lifestyle management helpful in coping with the Covid virus?

Hon. Kalita: Religion has its own role, uniting us on a common goal because they all have the same underlying principles. If religious leaders work together, which is a project of UPF, then we can unite people through their common goals and aspirations without disrespecting any religion. In addition, yoga improves immunity.

Hon. Moulana: The understanding between our interfaith communities, respecting each religion is very important. Mother Moon's approach of bringing us all together respecting all faiths, having mutual understanding, uniting people, especially during this Covid-19, is a good forum.

Closing comments: Dr. Robert S. Kittel, Chairman, Youth and Students for Peace, said this conference has been rich and rewarding in so many ways. When we go to a big conference, like the World Summit 2020 in Korea with 5,000 people, how many of us got a front row seat? Here, in this webinar, each person had a front row seat. This makes it more, not less, personal. Also, it is an effective use of time. If we travel to a conference using an airplane, we would spend two hours just at the airport. In the same time, we have already held our conference. Importantly, there definitely needs to be a follow-up. There were too many unasked questions.

Next month, we are planning a Rally of Hope webcast. All are invited and you have a front row seat reserved. See you again soon.