

UPF-USA Hosts Forum on Peacebuilding in Pakistan

Tomiko Duggan
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Washington, D.C., United States -- Seventy people gathered in the Founder's Room at The Washington Times on April 24, 2016 to hear seven panelists speak about peacebuilding in Pakistan. Recent tragic events in Pakistan, including the murder of Dr. Soran Singh, a highly-respected Pakistani Sikh doctor, TV anchor and politician, and the minister of Minorities of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, inspired this forum on "Interfaith for Understanding and Peacebuilding," which was organized by UPF-USA, Washington, D.C. Before joining Pakistan's political party Tehreek-e-Insaf (the Pakistan Movement for Justice, often referred to as the PTI), a communitarian political party that aims to create a welfare state¹, in 2011, he was a member of Jamaat-e-Islami (JI) Pakistan, a socially conservative, Islamist political party, for nine years. He joined the JI in an effort to bring peace to Pakistan. Dr. Singh was appointed as an Ambassador for Peace five years ago in Pakistan. A moment of silence was offered by all in his memory.

Mrs. Tomiko Duggan, director of public affairs of UPF-USA, presented the work of UPF through a short video and then introduced Dr. Zulfigar Kazmi, executive director of The Common Grounds USA, which co-sponsored the event, as emcee. He is also the vice president of the China-American Friendship Foundation which focuses on fostering relationships between the U.S., Pakistan and China.

Dr. Kazmi introduced the first speaker, Mr. Victor V. Gill, president of the Christian Voice of Pakistan. He asked, "Is religion part of the solution or part of the problem? Both." Conflicts began at the beginning of time with Cain and Abel, he added. God hoped that Cain would change his mind and not fight with his brother, but he didn't overcome. "Did these brothers have a religion? Yes," he said. So do terrorists who kill others without knowing that they are their brothers. He explained that all people have something within them that moves them toward respecting religion and God. However, many feel "Schadenfreude," or happiness when the "other side" loses people. In the Holy Koran, Sura, or verse, 5:32 states, "If one person is killed it is too many." Killing is not for people who believe in God, he added. Religion is like a medicine; it can heal us and give us value. But if you take too much of it, it becomes toxic. Medicine bottles say: "Keep out of reach of children." This is also true for religious extremism; it is unhealthy.

The next speaker was Mr. Manny Manawar Alam, president of the Pakistani American Congress (PAC). He is the first Christian president of the organization. He began by saying that bringing everyone together under one umbrella for peace is "monstrously challenging." He noted an instance when the U.S. was going to sell F16 jet fighter aircrafts to Pakistan, but delayed the deal when 74 Christians were killed and 341 were injured in an Easter Sunday morning bombing in Lahore city. He said we need a win-win situation for U.S.-Pakistan relations, and that there are many ongoing efforts -- including interfaith dialogues and initiatives by NGOs, such as the American Friends Service Committee -- to promote peace in Pakistan. He feels that Pakistan needs secular schools like the ones Indonesia and the Philippines have and that women and youth need to be involved in teaching tolerance, as is done in Thailand. He concluded by saying that "No religion will bring peace; it is you and me who will get the job done!"

The third speaker was Mr. Javed Ali Kalhoro, an Ambassador for Peace from Pakistan. He is a TV reporter and a Muslim. He has been visiting the U.S. for two weeks and is working on his Ph.D. He said that after 1980, a group called Zia's children emerged in Pakistan claiming to be the main jihadists. When he studied in school, deeniyat (religious studies) were not as radicalized as they are today. While the curriculum is funded by the UK's DfID (Department for International Development) and USAID (the United States Agency for International Development), the aid organizations don't know what is being taught or what is written in textbooks. The West is paying for the radicalization of Pakistan and doesn't know it. The reality is only Muslims can become government leaders. Minorities make up 20 percent of Pakistan's population and none can hold positions of influence, he said. His hometown was always integrated and thus peaceful. He added that all of Pakistan needs a non-radicalized curriculum. "We do not need a religious war but a war of ideology."



The fourth speaker was Mr. Douglas Burton, a former U.S. State Department official in Iraq. He was also a member of the press while serving in Kirkuk, Iraq in May of 2007, while the U.S. and Iraq were gaining ground against Al-Qaeda. He said that "genocide against minorities in Iraq and Syria is ongoing." "We need to get out of the mindset of denying the link between Islam and radicalism; the ones who are fighting are Muslims." The 2.5 million Christians have historically been mediators between the Shi'a and the Sunnis; we need them to continue to play that role in Iraq, he added. But extreme genocide is being perpetrated against the ancient Chaldean Christians, Mandaeans, Yazidis and Assyrians². He continued saying that there are two million refugees now in the Kurdish area and that the 360,000 Christians, who are the most educated leaders, are struggling to survive. Many minorities have tried to leave the country, he added. There is an effort now to create a safe zone -- 14,000 square miles of space -- in a Kurdish-held area in the Nineveh plains, near the Tigris River around Mosul in northern Iraq. But the problem is that this area has oil fields; Iran, ISIS (the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria) and Syria want this area for its richness, so does Baghdad, he added. He said emphatically, "Radical Islam needs to be clearly known not denied." The governments in the world can do much to help this struggle; in the U.S., Congressmen Jeff Fortenberry and Anna Eshoo have been working to help relieve this crisis. The U.S. Defense of Nation Act is arming the militias in the area, who will defend their own areas, and once they are able to do so, then the economy can begin to develop. Private organizations can engage with NGOs and other organizations or groups to aid Iraq -- even churches can adopt another church in Mesopotamia, he added. "We need to win the war of ideas and remove a totalitarian regime." He also shared how he used his experience of being a Boy Scout leader to help connect the Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts in Kirkuk to U.S. organizations to exchange ideas, uniforms and badges, and to secure a non-political base for these social groups to work, a place where all Iraqis, regardless of religion or sect can work together in a healthy way.

The fifth speaker was the only woman on the panel, Ms. Hali Jilani, director of the Institute of Cultural Intelligence. She is a well-educated Afghan and Muslim who has served as an aid worker and a military advisor, and has taught U.S. soldiers in Afghanistan, Iraq and Pakistan about the cultural needs of the people and how to reach tribal leaders in each country to bring peace. She said, "We need to protect minority rights; the topic today is dear to my heart." She reported that the CIA (Central Intelligence Agency) made a mistake when it brought in Saudi advisors who were radicalized by the Wahhabi-style of Islam and then set up the Taliban foundations that later crushed Afghanistan's culture. These advisors were not natural allies; they had their own political agenda. The religious traditions of the area are

ancient. Cyrus the Great, a Zoroastrian, in 500 BCE, stated that “no religion is superior to another.” After he invaded a country he allowed the people to keep their own religions and worship their own gods. Maimonides, a gifted Jewish philosopher and teacher, who was one of the most prolific Torah scholars of the Middle Ages, was another inspiration for the area. He spoke so well about religion that the Christians and Muslims of the time didn’t allow him to continue to speak for fear that he might convince others of his views. “Each religion is valuable,” she said. When bad leadership tries to remove the ideas of another it creates a power vacuum. And when this happens, some “play the God card” to try to address the pain people have suffered, but then dominate them and cause more suffering, she said. This is how the Taliban were initially accepted by the Afghan people: after the Russians were driven out, they offered to help. Interfaith dialogue is essential for “[us] to understand and respect the beliefs of others,” she concluded.

The sixth speaker was Mr. Abbas Ali, a 16-year-old high school student at St. Anselm’s Abbey School in Washington, D.C. His father is a strong Shi’ite and his mother is Jewish. His grandfather, Johiri, was a famous Islamic teacher. His parents are now divorced, and he follows the Jewish faith. He wishes to understand other religions so that he can help bring peace to the world and works to spread “intercultural competency.” He shared that his father disliked all other religions except his own Shi’ite Islam. Mr. Ali believes that “there is no productivity in meaningless hatred.” His great grandmother, who was a Protestant, helped Jews escape the Nazis during World War II. He said he now understands Christianity much better and sees how religions can work together. “It is rare for a religion to solve religious conflicts and acts of violence,” he added. Many conflicts are the result of economic, political or cultural problems, not just religious ones, he said. All religions have humanitarian aspects, but the Taliban has not shown theirs yet, he commented. “A secular approach is needed now.” Ignorance of the “other” is the real problem. We need to use the ‘spiritual approach’ first, then the ‘secular approach;’ however, if both fail, only then should we use the military approach because a military effort will fuel violence and stir up negative passions. A broad educational system must promote love and respect for all, and peace makers need to be diverse, ethnically, age-wise and religiously, he concluded.

Mr. Alex Cromwell was the final and seventh speaker. He is an instructor at the School of International Service at American University in Washington, D.C. He is working on his Ph.D. in Conflict Resolution at George Mason University in Virginia. He said that “peace begins within ourselves.” Pakistan is suffering so much conflict because of religious narrowness. “When a religion focuses on being ‘chosen’ problems arise because other religions are [viewed as] “less chosen,” he said. “My God versus your God,” kind of thinking, he added. “We need to change the lens we are looking through.” He works to bring youth together to meet the “other” to understand that the feelings, desires and goals of the “others” are just as valuable as one’s own. The new relationships that are forged create change and an attitude shift, he said. He read several reflections of students who came to the U.S. and got to know Americans. One young Muslim, who said he was taught that all non-Muslims were going to hell, shared how he was moved by the tears of a Native American who spoke passionately about his beliefs. He was also moved by the mother of the family he was staying with who prayed sincerely with tears. He decided that such a loving, kind and sincere woman was definitely not going to hell. Another young Muslim said he felt shame because he had once felt happy the 9/11 attacks in New York had occurred for he believed the U.S. was a bully and a terrorist country. When he heard that those people who lost loved ones during that time had actually forgiven the Muslims, he was sorry for his ignorance and said, “Now I can appreciate anyone wherever I go in the world.” Mr. Cromwell said that when a young person is exposed to people of different faiths and who have different beliefs than his or her own, it can foster good relations and open the mind of the person to more reasonable thinking. He believes attitudes can change through relationships and beliefs are good and bad everywhere, but we are all human beings. And behaviors can shift to practice tolerance and understanding.

Following the panel, seven new Ambassadors for Peace were appointed: Mr. Umar Farooq, founder and CEO of NEXT TV, a lifestyle program that collaborates with The Common Grounds; Mrs. Sadaf Shahid, a peace activist who hosts an annual women’s peace conference and has been instrumental in promoting interfaith dialogue in Virginia; Mr. Mazhar Chughtai, a leading Pakistani-American businessman and educator who supports educational and health programs in Pakistan; and four of the speakers: Mr. Ali, Mr. Cromwell, Mr. Alam, and Mr. Gill.



