

## UPF Asia Pacific held its first Peace Talks webinar: Beyond the Coronavirus

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The Universal Peace Federation of the Asia Pacific region held its first "Peace Talks" webinar, April 22, with five distinguished speakers from five nations: Australia, Philippines, Nepal, Hong Kong, and Tajikistan. The dialogue was rich, informative, honest and hopeful with 396 guests registered for the conference. Speakers looked into the past to learn much-needed lessons, yet kept a clear future-oriented outlook. All, in various ways, appreciated the work and foundation of UPF. The theme was, "A Circle of Light: Moving Through and Beyond the Coronavirus Crisis."

Hon. Ek Nath Dhakal, Chairman UPF and International Association of Parliamentarians for Peace Asia Pacific, served as moderator. He called this engagement timely and significant since the content would "inform, stimulate and expand the capacity of UPF" to help advance world peace.

The Regional Group Chairman of UPF, Dr. Yong Chung-sik, explained to the participants that UPF co-founder, Dr. Hak Ja Han Moon, was urging them to find solutions through cooperative action beyond the boundaries of race, nationality and religion so as to end the suffering of humankind and establish a world of universal peace and sustainable development.

From down under, Hon. David Clarke (Member of the Legislative Council of the Parliament of New South Wales, Australia (2003 – 2019), former Parliamentary Secretary for Justice, and a dedicated UPF Ambassador for Peace) spoke first. He highlighted that his nation, although a continent unto itself with no nation bordering it, realized that being isolated and far from others offered little protection. He kept a positive attitude but said we had to face the hard truth and look for solutions before noting that the World Health Organization has sent costly mixed signals. "No one," said Hon. Clarke, "has the right to withhold information" and all nations must cooperate together to solve this pandemic and its aftermath.

Father Eliseo R. Mercado Jr., OMI, Ph.D., (Director, Institute for Autonomy and Governance, Professor, Islamic Jurisprudence with Adamson University, and former President, Notre Dame University, Cotabato City, Philippines), laid out five points: 1) humility before God, in that, we need to admit we are frequently not in charge of our future, 2) genuine religiosity flourished despite churches, mosques or temples being locked down as people were more caring for others than ever, 3) our planet is "breathing" again due to reduced carbon emissions, 4) he reiterated United Nations Secretary General António Guterres' call for a universal ceasefire, and 5) the renewal of prayer life as we pray for ourselves, for each other and for our planet.

From the Himalayan mountains, Dr. K.B. Rokaya, (a noted thinker, writer and academician, President of Nepal Intellectuals Forum and former Commissioner of Human Rights Commission, Nepal) appreciated UPF for its dedicated staff, strong passion, clear vision, and willingness to sacrifice its resources for world peace. He said UPF was uniquely situated to make a positive contribution at this juncture of history. He called for a restructuring of the United Nations, reminding us of Father Moon's call for a 2-tier structure of the UN-body with both a religious and political wing, with religions taking the lead.

Hon. Eddie Ng, (former Secretary for Education, former president of the Asia Pacific Federation of Personnel Management Associations from Hong Kong) explained that although the virus was initially a complete unknown which caught everyone by total surprise, our ultimate focus must be to "restore hope to people." Instead of focusing on the size of the financial deficit, we must save lives, whatever the cost. Now was not the time to play polarizing politics, but to concentrate on "collective learning" to mitigate as quickly as possible and prevent future catastrophes. Hon. Ng concluded by saying that UPF has "tremendous potential" and was in the "best position" to offer constructive collaboration in dealing with the crisis.

The last speaker was the youngest. Mr. Jamalov Parviz, 28, from Tajikistan (Civil Society Activist and a UPF Ambassador for Peace) said that although there were no recorded cases of coronavirus in his country, they could "smell a sense of fear around them" as there has been a steep economic downturn. Nevertheless, he could see a wave of altruism emerging. People are caring for, loving and being compassionate in unprecedented ways. He called for more pro bona volunteerism and noted that this spirit was on full display for the world to see in the effective way South Korea handled the pandemic with a sense of healthy nationalism.

There was time for only two questions at the end. First, a participant asked about the predictions or changes that would come in the post-coronavirus era. Answer: No one knows for certain, there are still many uncertainties and unknowns. The second question was about the role that the digital educational platform can play in helping us through this crisis. Answer: In Hong Kong there was already a strong shift towards internet-based education and so when social distancing became the sudden new norm, there was minimal disruption to learning.