

Statement by Warren Hoge

World Interfaith Harmony Week

**“The Role of Faith Based Organizations and Interfaith Initiatives in
Development, Reconciliation and Peacebuilding”**

Thursday, February 3

1.15 - 2.00 pm

ECOSOC Room

Faith: A Catalyst for Conflict Resolution

Thank you, Ambassador Gokcen.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen, Dear Friends:

I am very happy to be here to participate in this important dialogue on the role of faith-based organizations and religious leaders in conflict resolution and peacebuilding.

I represent the International Peace Institute (IPI), an organization created forty-one years ago as the International Peace Academy, or IPA, with the original mission of training UN peacekeepers.

Our mission has evolved over those four decades, and today we are a research institute with the mission of promoting the prevention and settlement of conflicts between and within states by strengthening multilateral peace and security institutions through policy research. Our research focuses on conflict prevention and mediation, peacekeeping and peacebuilding.

Over the years, we have noted a major shift in the nature of conflict. Today, we see more wars being fought *within* countries than *between* them. We see societies ripped apart by civil wars and internal violence. We see how faith-based discrimination and oppression of religious minorities in different countries across the globe lead to instability and extremism.

In our interconnected world, these centers of instability do not stay isolated. They spread like rings in the water, moving from one continent to another.

Indeed, the interconnected nature of these conflicts is a test for the capacities of our multilateral system and the United Nations, as this system and its institutions were primarily set up to address violence *between* nations.

We therefore need to shift our perspective. We need to refine the international community's approach to conflict resolution and peacebuilding. In order to solve today's conflicts, we cannot use a "top-down" methodology. Rather, we have to start at the bottom, at the community level, and work our way through the grass-roots level of society.

In recent years, scholars of conflict resolution have increasingly recognized the key role of religious leaders in violence prevention and peacebuilding. Religious leaders and organizations have the unique opportunity to shape religious practice into a catalyst for conflict transformation, reconciliation and social justice.

Faith is a powerful force. And when different faiths come together for the cause of peace, their forces multiply.

I would like to cite some examples, but it would be delinquent of me not to acknowledge at the outset the *contrary* fact that religion can also be a cause of division, and religious diversity can become distorted into religious militancy, particularly in those situations where religion and nationality become entwined and historical myths and cultural symbols associated with religion become elements that unify warring factions rather than pacify them.

Since IPI has for nearly two decades had an active Africa Program, I found myself first looking at many African countries where the presence of religious leaders and inter-faith dialogue have been important in instances of successful conflict resolution.

In Liberia, an extraordinary and now storied women's peacebuilding movement involving both Muslim and Christian women buttressed peace talks, supported UN-led disarmament operations, interceded with former aggressors and helped bring about the first authentic democratic election in the country.

In Mozambique, religious actors were indispensable in ending a 15-year-old civil war. It was a case in which a religious community inspired by Biblical imperatives of service, compassion and peace helped to facilitate and to mediate the talks which eventually resulted in the signing of peace accords.

In Sierra Leone, a country convulsed by an almost decade-long civil war, the mosques and churches were key players in putting an end to the conflict. The Inter-Religious Council of Sierra Leone was one of the most visible and effective bridges between the warring factions and the population. It was this bridge that helped the peace process forward towards the final adoption of the Lomé Peace Agreement and stabilization of the country.

In South Africa, religious communities were at the forefront during the apartheid era of both legitimizing and denouncing state actions. But together with secular organizations, most notably the African National Congress (ANC), religious actors contributed to the peaceful move to democratic rule, encouraging the formation of transitional justice institutions based on restorative justice, truth recovery and reconciliation.

In civil conflicts elsewhere, such as in Colombia, we have seen how religious actors have engaged in facilitation, mediation and even negotiations between militant groups and the government. Pastoral documents from the Colombian Conference of Catholic Bishops have guided peace negotiations and sought to provide ethical guidelines for Colombians in relation to questions of peace and conflict. Faith-based organizations across Colombia have provided valuable social services and have mediated local conflicts.

For five years in the early 1980s, I was a correspondent for The New York Times in South and Central America, and I was continually impressed at how these courageous men and women of the cloth actively engaged themselves in local protests and movements against military dictatorships and autocratic governments, doing their best to expose the political neglect and abuse of marginalized people, often at high risk to their own safety. The list of priests, nuns and religious leaders who have been assassinated and kidnapped and murdered is a distressingly long one.

Perhaps the most heartening development I covered in my more than 30 years of foreign correspondence, often in conflict zones, was the peace accord in Northern Ireland, the embattled British province that I covered closely over the eight years from 1996 to 2004 that I was based in London for The New York Times.

The conflict there is often thought of as a religious war when in fact it was a dispute over whether the province would remain a part of Great Britain or ally itself with the Irish Republic.

But it is a fact that religion served as a marker of national identity between the republicans, who were largely Catholic, and the unionists, who were predominately Protestant. That said, religious leaders on both sides consistently opposed the violence and played a major role in the peace agreement of 1998.

Thus the Northern Ireland case demonstrates not only how religious identity and symbols can *infuse* a conflict but also how religious actors can use their authority for *reconciliation*.

Before closing, I want to make mention of an academic center that does significant work in this area and proved to be a rich resource for me in compiling some of these examples. It is the Berkeley Center for Religion, Peace & World Affairs at Georgetown University.

What we must learn from these few experiences I have noted is that religion can be a powerful tool for peace, if it is used in a constructive manner. And we must also realize the potential of inter-faith dialogue as a tool for conflict prevention, peacemaking and peacebuilding.

Indeed, we should use the multilateral platform of the United Nations to bring forward inter-faith initiatives between different countries and cultures.

That is why the initiative of King Abdullah of Jordan and the UN General Assembly decision last October to establish a World Interfaith Harmony Week is so important.

This week -- and our meeting here today -- provide a welcome chance to learn from each others' experiences, to spur new inter-faith initiatives, and to deepen our knowledge about the relationship between religion and conflict resolution.

I wish this week much success, and I look forward to hearing the views and experiences of all of you present here today.

Thank you.
