



# **United Religions Initiative (URI)**

**URI AFRICA AND URI GREAT LAKES REGION**

***“The Role of Religions to Build Peace, Security and  
Counter Violent Extremism in Africa”***

**22<sup>nd</sup> - 23<sup>rd</sup> August, 2011**

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## **Introduction**

United Religions Initiative (URI) and URI Africa and the URI Great Lakes Region held a two-day interactive dialogue on Monday, 22<sup>nd</sup> and Tuesday, 23<sup>rd</sup> August 2011 on “The Role of Religions to Build Peace, Security and Counter Violent Extremism in Africa”. The dialogue held in response to the increasing number of religiously motivated conflicts across Africa; took place in follow up of the African Union and African Religious Leaders meeting in Abuja, Nigeria held on June 2010, in which they launched the African Union Interfaith Dialogue Forum to harness the power of religious communities for peace, integration and development.

The conference drew over 70 representatives from the various regions in Africa and the Great Lakes. They comprised URI ambassadors and representatives to the United Nations, the African Union, URI Global Council Trustee Council, Africa and the Great Lakes Region. At the grass roots level, members from the different Cooperation Circles of Burundi, Kenya, DR Congo, Malawi, Ethiopia, also participated in the conference. Also in attendance were members of the local and international civil society. Others were the members and leaders of the various religious interfaith of the Shikh, Bahai, Islam, Bahia, Judaism, society of Krishna Consciousness and Christianity. The dialogue also attracted members of the local and international media who took coverage. Notable figures included the Guest of Honour, H.E. the Vice President of the Republic of Uganda, the army Spokes person of the Uganda Peoples Defense Forces (UPDF) and the Somali Ambassador to Uganda, H.E. Sayid Ahmed Sheikh Dahir.

## **Significant statements from the conference**

At this conference, participants in their individual capacity and in the name of the organizations they presented reaffirmed their position on the fundamental principle of the Golden Rule that continues to play a major role in peace-building, interfaith harmony, security, co-existence and counter violent extremisms. The Golden Rule, is accepted by all religions and traditions and cultures that addresses critical issues such as peace, security, democracy, human rights, respect for each other, gender equity, social development, interfaith harmony, constructive dialogue among nations, conflict prevention and building right human relationship remained as a binding strength at this unique assembly.

As well, the official statement from the Guest of Honour, H.E. the Vice President of the Republic of Uganda, Edward Kiwanuka Sekandi, reiterated on the role of religion in building peace and reaffirmed Uganda’s continued commitment and support towards all regional and international mechanisms for peace.

## Outcomes from the conference

Overall, the conference aimed at highlighting the role of religions in Africa in building Peace, Security and to Counter Extremism and, to explore constructive ways of resolving conflicts at national and at continental level, reaffirmed that religion as a binding strength, common to all people of diverse religions, spiritual expressions and indigenous traditions throughout the world; plays a critical role in building Peace, Security and to Counter Extremism the world over. And that Africa is a sanctuary for peace, only misguided by the social-cultural, economic and political tensions suffered during the colonial era and post independence, and eating its way up to the current times.

Notable statements on ***Religion and Peace*** in which six religions (Islam, Bahai, Judaism, Society of Krishna Consciousness, and Christianity) shared their perspectives on peace revealed that; all the various religious traditions emphasize peace in the world. Love, compassion, unity, non discrimination, equality, accommodation among others is the binding force for all humanity, as all human beings are created in the same image of God. It became pertinent that extremists on their own individual accord have betrayed their religious principles to engage in conflict and the worst ever experienced atrocities claiming innocent lives all over the world. Thus, it remained a challenge as well as a personal and combined effort among the varied religions to address their religious differences, by building on existing strengths guided by the truth in all religions to build peace and security at local, national, regional and continental level.

The presentation on ***Religious Peace Efforts*** deliberated upon by Rev. Omona Andrew David, a Lecturer at Mukono University, Uganda highlighted the efforts and challenges faced in the Great lakes Region. This revealed that the Great lakes Region has since the 19<sup>th</sup> century engaged in a number of religious peace efforts, with notable ones including, the Uganda Joint Christian Council (UJCC), and the Inter-religious Council of Uganda, and Acholi Religious Leaders Peace Initiative (ARLPI). While in Kenya, churches and other religious bodies came up together to condemn the post election violence and restore hope in people. In DRC and Burundi, both formal and informal level works have existed respectively. At the regional level, through the structure of Justice and Peace Commission, ecumenical bodies have engaged communities in prejudice reduction encounters, thus opening up more cooperation between people of the Great Lakes Region.

Major challenges include lack of moral authority in talking about peace building in some part of the Great Lakes Region. For example, in Rwanda, where during the 1994 genocide some priests, nuns and Christians participated in the killings. The region also faces a challenge of reconstructing the shattered social fabric whereby healing the memories and fostering reconciliation is hard. Some parts of the region also seem to

have a somewhat negative attitude towards religious leaders who are accused of getting ‘too much’ involved peace efforts, thereby suspected of threatening political power.

Major strategies for the better performance of the religious peace efforts included among others, different stakeholders to support religious bodies to realize peaceful co-existence amongst the people of the Great Lakes Region, which can be achieved through harmonizing efforts and stop working in isolation, stop fighting each other but come together for a common cause of building peace and security and “walking the talk” both in private and public. Religious bodies also realized the need to correct their image by putting right the wrongs they have done in the past by asking for forgiveness from the communities that have been treated unjustly on behalf of religions and communities or nations.

***Reflections on Religious and Security Regional Efforts*** which benefited from H.E. Sayid Ahmed Sheikh Dahir, the Somali Ambassador to Uganda and Kezaala Najib of the same office, Lt. Col. Felix Kulayigye, UPDF army Spokes Person and Dr. Emmanuel Ivogba, URI member from Nigeria, who shared their efforts in ousting conflict from the region. Their experiences pointed to a common factor of violent extremist movements in the Great lakes region as emanating from religiously motivated divides. The movements such as the *Al Shabaab* in Somalia, the *Lord’s Resistance Army* (LRA) in Uganda, *Boko Haram* of Nigeria, have built on the torn social fabric aggrieved by among others, despair, tribalism, social-economic frustrations, lawlessness, social injustice, political dictatorship of the colonial and post independent regimes and Western imperialism; that have continued to nurture extremist tendencies, all using religion as a scapegoat, a common element to all.

The Regional Security Efforts have been majorly affected by a divided standpoint among some AU member states on the Responsibility to Protect principle, coupled with the principle of non interference or state sovereignty, and a dependency syndrome thinking that Africa’s problems should be solved by outsiders. Other challenges include mistrust of the peace keepers by the natives such as the AMISOM in Somalia, varied misconceptions and rejection of nationals attached to the terrorists, like the case of Somalis in Uganda, and the selfish minds who continue to fund terrorism.

## **Lessons and Challenges**

Lessons drawn from this conference suggest that Religion is a uniting factor but a double edged sword that can be used for and against peace in the world. The different religions the world over preach peace guided by the principle of the Golden rule, “Treat others the way you want to be treated”. However, the missing link can be attributed to perverted minds of some individuals who have exploited among others, the varied inter-religious differences, lack of a harmonized front among religions and states, thus seeking pity and support from the innocent unsuspecting youth, women and children in

the local communities and torn apart and lost hope from their leadership who simply look on as they struggle to survive in all aspects of life.

Traditionally in the Great Lakes region, the role of peace building has been left to the religious leaders, who continue to struggle in the eyes of leadership who view them with suspicion and a threat to political power.

The regional and international community seems to be using war to end terrorism, and only intervening in zones that are considered 'lucrative', thus underscoring on the importance of understanding the extremists, what they stand for, what caused or cause their movements, in order to enable them to draw relevant yet acceptable solutions to address the threat of violent extremism in Africa and the rest of the globe.

### **Way forward**

The participants of this conference reaffirmed URI's position to promote enduring, daily interfaith cooperation, to end religiously motivated violence and to create cultures of peace, justice and healing for the Earth and all living beings. Thus, they strongly denounced violent extremism orchestrated in name of religion across Africa through a "The Kampala Declaration for Interfaith Cooperation".

This action point will among others be realized through addressing the root causes of conflict, healing and reconciliation, accept and accommodate religious pluralism, a common understanding and strategy, teaching of love, mobilizing the youth, women and children into peace building, local, regional and international networks and early warning and early response mechanisms.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

This conference consented to the fact that Africa and the Great Lakes Region is renown as a sanctuary for peace only threatened by past events gaining ground. To this effect, members united to counter the cancer of religiously motivated conflict eating up the continent with a common voice of standing up to protect the Golden Principle driven by the vision that *"There will be peace and harmony on earth if we all act according to the Golden Rule"*.

Achieving this particularly requires individuals, the civil society, states/statesmen, and the international community to invest their entire life towards this cause, walk the talk both in private and public, have a common voice and strategy among religions, and a harmonized front against violent extremism Africa and the Great Lakes Region and the rest of the globe.