Dialogue among Civilizations
The Asia-Pacific Regional Conference on Dialogue among Cultures and Civilizations for Peace and Sustainable Development
Hanoi, Viet Nam
20 and 21 December 2004

Kumari Selja
Vu Khieu
Sohanvir Chaudhary
Paula S. Bloomfield
Ratnajeevan Hoole
Nguyen Minh Hien
Riwanto Tirtosudarmo
Samuel Lee
Guan Shijie
Allisher Ikramov
Sharifah Fatmah Alhabshi
Preciosa Soliven
Pham Quang Nghi
Prince Sisowath Panara
Sririvuth
To Ngoc Thanh
Tran Quoc Vuong
Kla Somtrakool
Nguyen van Huy
Ishii Yoneo
Zhou Nan-Zhao
Dato Lee Yee-Cheong

Le Cong Phung
Pham Gia Khiem
Koichiro Matsuura

Nguyen Quoc Trieu
Nima Tshering
Bimalendra Nidhi
Toke Talagi
Stephan Plumat
Savithri Suwansathit
Kang Om
Akihiro Chiba
Yoshimori Suzuki
Arif Rachman
Johanna Lasonen
Ghulam Bibi Bharwan
Azizan Baharuddin
Phanndoangchith Vongs

Shen Che
Ho Ton Trinh
Samlane Luangaphay
Khuon Haing
Joy de Leo
Arun Balasubramaniam
Yuri V. Yakovets

Hans d'Orville
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Edited by Hans D’ORVILLE, Clare STARK, and Caroline SIEBOLD, Bureau of Strategic Planning, UNESCO

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THE HANOI DECLARATION

adopted at the Asia-Pacific Regional Conference
on Dialogue among Cultures and Civilizations
for Peace and Sustainable Development

Hanoi, Viet Nam – 20 and 21 December 2004

We, Ministers, representatives of governments, scholars, experts and cultural practitioners from more than 30 countries of the Asia-Pacific region, participating in the Asia-Pacific Conference on Dialogue among Cultures and Civilizations for Peace and Sustainable Development, held in Hanoi, a recipient of UNESCO's City for Peace Prize, on 20 and 21 December 2004, hereby adopt the following Hanoi Declaration on Dialogue among Cultures and Civilizations for Peace and Sustainable Development:

1. Convinced that peace in the twenty-first century is inextricably linked with sustainable and inclusive development, human security and a dialogue based on shared human values,

2. Celebrating the diversity of the Asia-Pacific region in terms of cultures, tangible and intangible cultural heritage, artistic expression and creativity, religions and languages which makes it one of the most dynamic and diverse areas of the world,

3. Highlighting that diverse and abundant natural resources, eco-systems and biodiversity complement the rich cultural diversity of the region,

4. Aware that throughout history a dialogue among cultures and civilizations in various forms has enriched the diversity of each culture, and strengthened cultural diversity overall;

5. Stressing that all cultures and civilizations are equal and that dialogue should be based on commonly shared values and ethical principles, such as tolerance, respect for Others, mutual understanding, respect for cultural diversity, and adherence to non-violence and the principles of peaceful co-existence,
6. Conscious that dialogue needs to be rooted in democratic practices, the rule of law, respect for human rights and the dignity of the individual as well as in justice and equity,

7. Emphasizing that a commitment to dialogue among cultures and civilizations is also a commitment to fight terrorism, as terror rests always and everywhere upon prejudices, intolerance, exclusion and, above all, on the rejection of any dialogue,

8. Recognizing that, especially in the context of globalization, dialogue has the potential to become an engine for bolstering peace and security, reconciling conflicts, reinforcing cultural diversity and advancing sustainable development;

9. Inspired by the Global Agenda on the Dialogue among Civilizations - adopted by United Nations General Assembly resolution 56/6 of 21 November 2001 – which states, inter alia, that dialogue among cultures and civilizations is a process aimed at attaining justice, equality and tolerance in people-to-people relationships,

10. Guided by resolution of the UNESCO General Conference on “New perspectives in UNESCO’s activities pertaining to the dialogue among civilizations and cultures, including in particular follow-up to the New Delhi Ministerial Conference”, adopted at the 32nd session in October 2003 (resolution 32 C/47), which calls for a translation of global approaches into regionally relevant recommendations and concrete initiatives,

11. Commending UNESCO for its pioneering role in promoting a broad range of discussions on the subject of dialogue at global, regional and sub-regional levels,

12. Welcoming the Declaration on Dialogue among Cultures and Civilizations, adopted by the fifth Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) held in October 2004 in Hanoi,

13. Stressing the need for people everywhere to acquire a basic level of knowledge and understanding of other civilizations, cultures and religions as the best way to overcome lingering ignorances,

14. Underlining the important role policy-makers, governments, parliamentarians, actors of civil society, the academic and scientific communities, the private sector and professional associations, the media, religious and faith-based communities can play in initiating and conducting effective dialogue both within each country and within the region,

15. Determined to make dialogue a central feature of interaction in all walks of life, we resolve to adhere to the following set of specific commitments:
16. To enhance human security in the region by tackling with a sense of urgency – and in pursuit of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) - the challenges of poverty, trade and economic development, hunger, education and gender equality, child health and diseases, agricultural development, water and sanitation, urban development and environmental degradation,

17. To promote and to practice a culture of dialogue among nations and peoples of the Asia-Pacific region, thus increasing knowledge, appreciation, respect and compassion for “Others” and different cultures,

18. To accord a pivotal role to education in general and to the six Education for All (EFA) objectives in particular, which in the pursuit of quality education will entail renewal of school curricula, improvement and revision of textbooks and educational materials as well as re-orientation of the training of teachers,

19. To promote inter-cultural understanding, through both formal and non-formal education and through other means, such as the media and faith-based organizations,

20. To propose the selection of “dialogue among cultures and civilizations” as one of the major themes of the United Nations Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (2005-2014) and inviting UNESCO, as the lead agency for this Decade, to design and implement specific activities in that regard,

21. To intensify our joint efforts in support of the International Decade for a Culture of Peace and Non-Violence for the Children of the World (2001-2010), for which UNESCO also serves as lead agency, by undertaking more effective and visible dialogue-focused initiatives, especially at the community level, during the second half of the Decade,

22. To highlight the role of cultural diversity and heritage – in both tangible and intangible forms – as vectors of identities and as tools for reconciliation, and to emphasize the need for the protection of heritage and its preservation, presentation and transmission to future generations;

23. To record intangible heritage, whenever possible, in various forms to prevent its destruction or loss;

24. To strengthen the role of museums and other cultural institutions in fostering inter-cultural dialogue and mutual understanding,

25. To introduce an explicit gender perspective into activities promoting the dialogue and a culture of peace as well as empowering women fully, beginning with an expansion of universal basic education for girls and working for the attainment of the Millennium Development Goal (MDG)
calling for gender equality at all levels of education by 2015,

26. To promote broad-based networking in support of dialogue for peace and poverty alleviation, involving the sharing of knowledge and best practices and providing a source for learning and teaching at all levels,

27. To make full use of the various global networks under UNESCO auspices, such as the National Commissions for UNESCO, the Associated Schools Network (ASPnet), and the University Twinning and Networking Scheme (UNITWIN)/UNESCO Chairs Programme, as well as the regional networks like the Asia-Pacific Programme of Educational Innovation for Development (APEID), the Asia-Pacific Cultural Center for UNESCO (ACCU) and the Asia-Pacific Network for International Education and Values Education (APNIEVE) for the purpose of strengthening dialogue in the region,

28. To utilise information and communication technologies (ICTs) to bring together diverse communities, cultures, civilizations and different faiths, to advance freedom of expression and freedom of the press, and to broaden the outreach and quality of education,

29. To strengthen policies and mechanisms for regional co-operation as the natural way to tackle shared problems and to achieve sustainable development;

30. We, therefore, call, as part of the dialogue agenda, for concrete and tangible actions steeped in regional, national and local realities:

   a. To intensify people-to-people cultural and scientific exchanges and partnerships in the region, involving scholars, teachers, people in religious authority, students and media practitioners;

   b. as part of national education reforms to adapt educational programmes to the exigencies of quality education, in line with the precept of “learning to live together” and, to that end, to review and renew curricula, textbooks and educational materials;

   c. to develop a comprehensive statement on values education for the interrelated areas of peace, human rights and sustainable development which shall include provisions for integrating values in curricula, developing appropriate teaching resource materials and providing teacher support and training;

   d. to integrate intercultural components and approaches into teacher training;

   e. to strengthen the Associated School Network (ASPnet) with a view to developing more educational modules supporting dialogue, such as “Heritage in Young Hands”, and concrete intercultural exchanges on a
sustained basis, such as the Mondialogo Partnership;

f. to develop jointly other teaching and learning modules, in particular for education for sustainable development (ESD), education for international and intercultural understanding (EID) and human rights education, which should also be made available on-line;

g. to promote interconnectedness through education for global citizenship and civic responsibility, particularly by imparting values and peace education;

h. to encourage regular exchanges on curriculum development among universities and institutions of higher education in the region;

i. to introduce ICTs at all educational levels and in all communities for information exchange, knowledge-sharing, capacity-building and dialogue on educational challenges in the region and to provide content in multilingual form;

j. to use ICTs for dialogue by students both within universities and across different cultural areas, especially with a view to enhancing appreciation of the contributions by indigenous and traditional cultures to scientific and technological progress;

k. to establish a variety of new channels and modalities for intercultural dialogue and partnerships, especially among youth, to enhance mutual understanding, to share ideas and knowledge, to support creativity and to exchange scientific and technological information;

l. to that end, to intensify all types of networking, especially among the National Commissions for UNESCO in the region;

m. to promote the designation of new cultural routes and other mechanisms - such as an "earthenware and ceramics route" in the region - so as to highlight the value of cultural diversity, interaction and exchange;

n. to foster dialogue along recognized cultural routes, such as the Silk Road or the Slave Route, thereby universalising the inherent unity in human diversity;

o. to develop responsible cultural and eco-tourism, which may contribute to the sustainable development of local areas and economies while fostering dialogue and respect for cultural diversity and heritage;

p. to set up regional and interregional networking mechanisms linking museums as repositories of cultural heritage and to organize traveling exhibitions, artistic performances and professional exchanges;

q. to explore the feasibility of and modalities for creating a "Regional
Forum for Dialogue” bringing together all stakeholders, including representatives of women’s and youth organizations, and for organizing festivals of local and traditional performing arts throughout the Asia-Pacific region.

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31. We call on all governments of the region, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), the private sector and intergovernmental and international organizations to contribute to the implementation of the Hanoi Declaration;

32. We invite in particular UNESCO to assist - in its areas of competence - in the pursuit and realization of the various proposals made at the Hanoi conference, thereby creating the conditions for an effective dialogue among cultures and civilizations in the Asia-Pacific region and for interaction with other parts of the world;

33. We enjoin all countries of the region to ensure an early ratification of the Convention on the Protection of Intangible Heritage, which is an indivisible part of cultural heritage as a whole, and we support the early finalization of new standard-setting instruments, such as the Convention on Diversity of Cultural Contents and Artistic Expressions;

34. We are thankful to the Government of Japan, to UNESCO, the Asia/Pacific Cultural Centre for UNESCO and to L’Agence Intergouvernementale de la Francophonie for having contributed to the arrangements for the Hanoi Conference;

35. We express our sincere gratitude to the Government of the Socialist Republic of Viet Nam and to the Director-General of UNESCO, Mr Koichiro Matsuura, for having organized the important Hanoi conference and we thank profoundly the government and people of the Socialist Republic of Viet Nam and the Hanoi People’s Committee for their gracious hospitality and for the excellent arrangements made.
Human rights as a basis for dialogue among cultures: the dilemma

Ratnajeevan Hoole, Professor,
University of Peradeniya, Sri Lanka

The Sri Lankan background

The ethnic fratricide in Sri Lanka is now several decades old. It reflects the bitter conflict between the Tamil minority and the Sinhalese majority over sharing power since independence. The conflict has been characterized by discrimination and violence between the Tamil militants (the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, commonly referred to as the LTTE, which is the predominant group) and the government of Sri Lanka. Women, children and other innocent civilians, victims of this violent conflict, have been killed by indiscriminate shootings and suicide bombings.

The Constitution of Sri Lanka, enacted in 1978, has strong fundamental rights clauses that were not clearly understood and were rarely utilized in the pursuit of human rights. However, since the 1990s and particularly under the present presidency, the state has shown a firm commitment to human rights and has signed the government on to several human rights instruments and covenants [1]. These rights, together with the active application of the fundamental rights clauses in the constitution, have been widely perceived as concessions to minorities, and have for the first time given minorities a means of non-violent recourse to justice. It was a watershed in modern Sri Lanka’s political history that gave a sense of belonging to minorities.

Unfortunately, these rights are perceived by some as having been given to appease minorities, and are missing the centrality of human rights as universal heritage belonging to all. This misguided impression was reinforced by the fact that obligations concerning human rights are binding
on the government but not on the LTTE (although in recent years there have been laudable efforts to make them binding even on non-governmental forces that are in control of territory in Sri Lanka [2,3]). Thus, as international NGOs reminded the government of its obligations when confronted with atrocities by the army and when the government did little to react in the face of atrocities committed by the LTTE, the impression human rights were being used to give concessions to minorities was entrenched. In an Asian Values context, where the community is held above the individual, the basis of human rights can be caricatured by the fact that the ethos of human rights leans towards the rights of the individual, even when they are at odds with those of the community.

Incidents at universities

The two major communities in Sri Lanka are sorely divided. Polite silence is maintained on controversial issues while much ill will is harbored inside, even among those who work together on a daily basis and greet each other in seemingly effusive friendship.

Two examples that give an indication of the resentment that lays beneath the quiet at the surface, and which is maintained through polite non-discussion are discussed below. During the height of the war, when an army camp fell to the LTTE, Tamil students at the University of Peradeniya lit crackers in celebration while the Sinhalese students were in mourning. In response to the situation, Sinhalese students wanted to collect funds for the families of the dead. This would have created a difficult situation if the Dean had not diffused the tension because Tamils who were in sympathy with the LTTE would have had to identify themselves as such if they were to be honest and could have risked being beaten up or arrested as terrorist suspects. Thanks to the good sense of the Dean, the collection was restricted to a box in a public place with a notice that direct requests were prohibited.

The second example concerns a new political party called the Sihala Urumaya that states that Tamils who want to stay on in Sri Lanka must recognize and accept that Sri Lanka is a Sinhalese country and minorities must be prepared to be assimilated, just the way those who migrate to the US accept and switch to the English language. The particular problem arose when many academic staff members contested elections, as candidates of this party making Tamil students feel threatened about the impartiality of the grades they received from these lecturers. The matter of whether
academics can publicly espouse a cause that is hostile to some of their students has never been satisfactorily addressed.

**Human rights as a common legacy**

Although human rights and the activation of the fundamental rights provisions of the Sri Lankan Constitution are seen as having been enacted under western and international NGO pressure, there is no doubt now, in the light of the many beneficial court verdicts in favour of the rights of Sinhalese as well as Tamil individuals, that they are equally beneficial to the majority community as they are to minorities. Indeed, human rights have had a greater impact on the majority as many sought successfully to address human rights violations through the courts, such as denial of promotions.

Thus, we now have a situation where fundamental rights truly enjoy a common consensus among warring communities. Although in the matter of the clashes between the two ethnic communities, the particularly applicable rights are intellectually negated by the majority and are portrayed as an absurd minority proposition.

The course topic “Human Rights for Engineers” at the University of Peradeniya

In the year 2001, there was a lull in the fighting as government forces and the LTTE came to a face-off with no winners. It was a critical time for the country. It was therefore seen as an opportune time to introduce a course topic [4] that emphasized the common legacy in human rights [1].

The course topic was taught to a class of 20 students, almost equally divided between the two communities and including one Muslim student. They had studied together in a larger class of 60 for the previous 3 years, but the various members of the different communities did not know each other by name. To defuse the tension in discussing human rights, an attempt was made to put together a cross-cultural team to teach. There was always a member from each community who attended the course in case moderation was necessary, and to attest to what had been taught so that the lecturer’s credibility was maintained.

The course went through the conventions on human rights. There was good focus on the fundamental provisions of the Sri Lankan constitution and how to seek justice. This had the aim of placing human rights in a setting outside the background of the Sri Lankan ethnic conflict. Asian Values [5] were discussed in the context of human rights to explore the
rights of the family and the community (in the context of the African Charter [6]) as opposed to those of the individual.

With the same intention of understanding human rights as engendering a positive and ethnically neutral ethos, many good reasons for businesses to adhere to human rights standards were discussed [7-9]. Students learned that enterprises can improve their image by respecting human rights, that it makes good business sense, and that human rights encompasses more than ethnic conflict.

With a view to improving the communications skills of the class and broadening the scope of the course, a moot court was organized. Example cases from the European Court of Human Rights were taken and students asked to argue the cases on the basis of the conventions. The now famous McCann et al. case from Gibraltar [10] was described to highlight that there is a cost to creating a decent society. In that case, 3 known IRA terrorists were followed by the SAS and shot to death. The European Court faulted the UK for not taking sufficient measures to protect the “right to life” of these known IRA terrorists by arresting them at other opportunities they had when the risk to the lives of the terrorists was minimal. The students saw that the choice is ours to make. The choice between a decent society with costs and a risk free one where not all are included. In arguing this case as well as others, the majority Sinhalese students were deliberately asked to take the side of the aggrieved individual, and a Tamil student was asked to argue for the state after studying case histories. This reversal of roles contributed significantly to inter-communal understanding.

It was a fun time. It was perhaps the most enjoyable part of the teachers’ career, seeing the students working together as a team and becoming one people.

Although the students in class saw human rights in correct perspective, the establishment continued to see it as only for minorities. There was a formal charge and disciplinary inquiry for teaching human rights without authorization and politicizing the students. Fortunately, after some harrowing months, the inquiry report praised the efforts of the teachers in no uncertain terms; thereby, the message of the course had a wider audience than initially expected or planned.

The problems with humans rights and the resulting skepticism

Today in Sri Lanka, there is a kind of peace with no fighting subsequent to the military stalemate of 2002. There is wide international encourage-
ment for the peace process through a massive aid package that is contingent upon progress in the peace talks.

As a result, there is an unprecedented interest in human rights. There are grants and international travel funds for those who pursue its advocacy. Universities teach those subjects for which there is funding. Countries are vying (if not almost fighting) with each other to be peace brokers, for altruistic reasons as well as to gain influence. Many have invested in the peace process. There is commitment to it.

And yet, there is skepticism, even cynicism, for the following reasons that now undermine the acceptance of human rights:

1. Those among the majority, who saw human rights as a separatist tool that prevented the government from fighting the war as it ought to be fought (in their view) and bringing it to victory, today see human rights as the only way of imposing obligations of any sort on the LTTE. Among those who were opposed to human rights earlier and filed charges for teaching human rights are those who today teach it with great gusto because it is something to talk about at conferences and during international travels. A university that had just prior to the cease fire agreement urged the University Grants Commission not to send Tamil students to its programmes, now have written a successful research proposal to the government, claiming that with its multi-ethnic student body it was in a unique position to build peace and work towards the reconstruction of the Tamil areas that were devastated by the war.

2. Tamil separatists, who claimed their democratic rights were being denied, are now claiming that the LTTE is the sole representative of the Tamil people and only the LTTE can negotiate with the government on behalf of the Tamils. Many Tamils empathise with this view because land that is being settled by Sinhalese in the Northeast of the country is regarded by Tamils as their traditional homelands. Tamils feel threatened by these new settlers and see the LTTE's brutal method of killing settlers as the only way to deal with the problem and to protect them from being forcibly evicted to make way for settlers.

3. Western governments and donor agencies, worried about the peace process and presumably fearful that they would be displaced by other mediators should the ongoing peace process fall apart, effectively agree that the Tamil people have no democratic right other than to be represented by the LTTE. The totalitarian argument of order before freedom is now being put out by democracies, making people wonder if even democracy itself is not a mere tool of subjugation. Many observers see this attitude
as racism – that is, democracy is seemingly not for the third world and is reserved for the first world.

4. International NGO’s with their project mentality must keep the work going. So any sign that the peace process is in jeopardy is quickly denied. An example was when militant forces engaged in the massive recruitment of children. When human rights organizations issued reports, these claims were denied for months. When there were reports of political abductions, the peace monitors, with their heads in the sand like the proverbial ostrich, claimed it was a matter for the police and not them. Finally, it was when there were so many complaints that the truth was reluctantly admitted – the myth could no longer be maintained especially after the UN Secretary General’s special representative for children and armed conflict, Olara Otunu, applauded the University Teachers for Human Rights (Jaffna) for highlighting violations against children at risk to their on lives. Mr. Otunu went on to say before the third committee of the UN General Assembly, “I think of the University Teachers of Jaffna (Sri Lanka) [sic.] putting their lives on the lines in order to monitor and report on grievous violations against children” [11]. But by then much damage had been done to the workers who initially reported these matters and were labeled as Tamil traitors whose lies had been exposed by international observers on the scene.

5. Local NGOs, often funded by international NGOs, operate with the mind-set of finishing budgets. Many peace- and child- promoting NGO personnel spend their time in hotels where so called capacity building seminars give employees a lavish life-style. As a result, the associated expenses go to direct giving, whereas in reality they are a part of the massive administrative costs. The social order in the capital, Colombo, is being over-turned with many NGOs dominating the social scene with their lavish peace funds and life-styles and after-seminar tea parties and buffet lunches that most Sri Lankans do not even dream of. The problem is that, rather than being high-achievers, the employees of these organizations are often high-school dropouts whose only qualification for the jobs they hold is their fluency in English. Thus, when personnel from these organizations tell ministries how to run educational programmes, police how to conduct their interrogations and universities what to teach, there is absolute resentment. Often, as this writer knows from the experience of friends working for these organizations, there is much violation within these organizations of the very values they promote. This occurs because of the poor training of the personnel combined with their sense of superiority that arises from the fact that they speak English.
Conclusions

Sri Lanka is at a critical crossroads. The new human rights regime has done much to bridge the gap between the warring communities of the island. But today, at the threshold of peace, there are serious threats to this new human rights culture. Even as its benefits are being realized, many advocates of human rights have given room for the public to believe that it is a mere tool in the pursuit of narrow, partisan ends. This problem needs urgent addressing.

References