

56th Meeting of the Standing Committee
5-7 March 2013

Agenda item 6(a)

**Oral update on the High Commissioner's 2012 Dialogue
on Protection Challenges: Faith and Protection**

I. Background

In 2007, the High Commissioner launched the first in a series of Dialogues on Protection Challenges, with the aim of facilitating an informal, participatory dialogue on contemporary challenges confronting States, UNHCR, and other stakeholders in the area of international protection. Since that time, the Dialogues have examined the following themes: refugee protection, durable solutions and international migration (2007); protracted refugee situations (2008); challenges for people of concern to UNHCR in urban settings (2009); and protection gaps and responses (2010).¹ In 2012, in lieu of a Dialogue, UNHCR organized a ministerial-level meeting of UN Member States in commemoration of the 60th anniversary of the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees and the 50th anniversary of the 1961 Convention on the Reduction of Statelessness. The theme of the Dialogue in 2012 was “faith and protection.”² In preparing the Dialogue, UNHCR benefited from the support and partnership of a range of faith-based leaders and organizations, some of which submitted papers describing how humanitarian values and principles are compatible with the main tenets of their respective faiths.

II. Outcomes

The Dialogue, which took place in Geneva on 12-13 December 2012 with an impressive array of participants from a range of faiths, effectively highlighted the important role that faith-based organizations and local religious communities play in protecting asylum-seekers, refugees, internally displaced persons (IDPs) and stateless people. The participants explored how the right to seek and enjoy asylum and the protection of stateless persons are reflected in religious values and traditions; identified practical ways for UNHCR and other actors to better engage with religious leaders and communities in improving protection space; and considered whether there would be value in developing specific principles of partnership for cooperation between UNHCR and faith-based communities. The Dialogue was preceded by a half-day consultation between the High Commissioner and over 30 spiritual leaders, heads of faith-based organizations and experts in inter-faith dialogue.

The Dialogue helped foster appreciation for the importance of religion and spirituality in the lives of those the organization serves. Participants strongly confirmed the convergence and complementarity of humanitarian principles as they relate to refugees, stateless people and IDPs on the one hand, and fundamental religious values on the other. A strong consensus also emerged regarding the key principles of humanitarian work, including impartiality, non-discrimination, respect for the beliefs of others, diversity, empowerment, equality and protection against any form of conditionality.

¹ <http://www.unhcr.org/hc-dialogue>

² <http://www.unhcr.org/ministerial>

III. Follow-up and next steps

A number of concrete suggestions for follow-up were made during roundtables on the following subjects: 1) creating welcoming communities, 2) promoting durable solutions and 3) improving cooperation. As in previous years, the Dialogue was not structured to elicit formal or agreed outcomes. In his closing remarks, however, the High Commissioner highlighted a number of elements for follow-up, with the intention of maintaining the positive spirit and momentum generated by the Dialogue. They include:

1. Documenting examples of good practice regarding the work of faith-based organizations and local religious communities on protection;
2. Developing a code of conduct for faith leaders and organizations engaged in humanitarian work;
3. Conducting research on ways in which local faith leaders and communities can more effectively contribute to humanitarian action and protection; and
4. Developing training on faith literacy for UNHCR and partner staff.

Since the Dialogue, a number of organizations and faith leaders have expressed an interest in supporting these and other follow-up actions. It has been agreed that a lunchtime side event on faith and protection will be organized during the UNHCR Annual Consultations with non-governmental organizations (NGOs) on Wednesday, 12 June 2013. This will provide an opportunity for UNHCR and NGOs, including faith-based organizations, to examine progress made and to agree on next steps and timelines.

12 February 2013