

# Religions for Peace – Myanmar Chapter Report to ACRP

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*Religions for Peace – Myanmar Chapter presents to the Asian Conference of Religions for Peace (ACRP) Executive Committee its National Chapter Report between January 2018 and December 2018.*

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## OVERVIEW

In June 2012, religious communities in Myanmar came together to form *Religions for Peace-Myanmar (RfP-M)* as the country’s first full-fledged representative and action-oriented interreligious body for reconciliation, peace and development. *RfP-M* brings together all of the four major religions of Myanmar; Buddhism, Christianity, Islam and Hinduism and was officially inaugurated in September 2012. Since then, organization has been implementing various projects focusing on social cohesion and harmony and climate changed activities in target areas.

On 28 March 2018, a review meeting on the project: “*Multi-Religious Networks Promoting Religious Diversity and Tolerance*” was conducted under the title: “Multi-Religious Peacebuilding: Best Practices and Lessons Learned in Myanmar”. It has resulted to build platform for Multi-Religious Communities and to achieve new initiatives for peace building and social cohesion in Myanmar.

A “ High- level multi-religious delegation to Myanmar” event took place in May 2018 to advance a multi-religious vision of peace and development in Myanmar and to further strengthen ongoing collaboration among diverse actors for peace, justice and reconciliation.

The inaugural Religions for Peace Advisory Forum on National Reconciliation and Peace in Myanmar (RfP Advisory Forum) was convened in Nay Pyi Taw, on 21-22 November 2018. The RfP Advisory Forum brought together a selected group of over 100 stakeholders for national reconciliation and peace in the country including Myanmar and international senior religious leaders, senior representatives of the Myanmar government and the military, parliamentarians

from ruling and opposition parties, representatives of ethnic organizations, foreign governments, UN agencies, international and national NGOs, civil society groups and experts.

H.E. State Counsellor Daw Aung San Suu Kyi affirmed the importance of the RfP Advisory Forum, noting the vital role of Myanmar's religious communities and commented that "placing emphasis on interfaith dialogue as a path to peace underscores the vital and indispensable role that the religious leaders play in shaping a peaceful world." She underscored her conviction that peace is "positive," not only the absence of conflict and must include a foundation in essentially positive values.

As a result of the forum, the following five sectors of the Standing Committee were established to enhance the development of the national peace process;

- Education
- Equal Rights and Responsibilities for All Ethnic and Minority Groups
- Women's Empowerment and Participation
- Youth Empowerment and Engagement
- Identity, Diversity and Common Challenges in Rakhine State

The standing committee was reinforced by four working groups led by 21 EC members and other stakeholders. These five segments will be developed by conducting preparatory meetings, follow up activities and action plans until 2020.

In December 2018, a regional youth network, RfP Asia & Pacific Interfaith Youth Network (APIYN), organized annual camp in Myanmar with youth delegates from 19 Asia countries. The Camp is co-organized by ACRP Seoul Peace Education Center (SPEC), RfP Asia, and RfP Myanmar.

From this camp, the youth network has been strengthened as they managed to exchange their experiences, respect each other's culture and traditional practices.

In addition to all the above events, RfP-M was able to organize Interfaith Dialogue Skill trainings, Interfaith Cleaning campaign and Peacebuilding trainings successfully with multi-religious leaders, women and youth in Mrauk-U, Rakhine State; Meiktila, Mandalay Region and Pyay, Bago Region. Religions for Peace-Myanmar Core Members have actively participated in all levels of multi-religious and governmental meetings and discussions.

U Myint Swe, President, RfP-Myanmar had the opportunity to attend the Asia Regional meetings in India and Bangladesh in 2018 and discussed Rakhine issues and other related issues concerning interfaith peace building in Myanmar.

## Our Mission

RfP-M's mission is for communities with diverse beliefs to live in peace and harmony in Myanmar. It works to achieve that by motivating all religious adherents in Myanmar to concerted efforts at promoting peace and harmony; building awareness of the principles of peace within all religious tradition; implementing collaborative actions based on shared moral commitments; and connecting and cooperating with national and international religious bodies, organizations, communities and societies to promote and enhance lasting peace and universal harmony.

## Multi-Religious Peacebuilding: Best Practices and Lessons Learned in Myanmar

This project evaluation for Religions for Peace International RfP (Int) and *Religions for Peace-Myanmar (RfP-M)* examined the results and achievements of the two year project 'Multi-Religious Networks Promoting Religious Diversity and Tolerance'. As with all formal evaluations, the aim of this report is to measure progress against previously defined project objectives and indicators, and to understand what aspects of the project worked well and why. However, this significant project also provided an important opportunity for broader learning, and for understanding the potential for religious peacebuilding not only in Myanmar, but also in other comparable sensitive and volatile contexts.

Great credit must go to RfP Int. and Myanmar staff for their achievements in what have often been very difficult and challenging circumstances, and for their openness, generosity and support in completing this evaluation. Also the US Department of State, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor must be recognized for their continued support and funding for the project.



*Fig:1. Opening remark by Secretary General, RfP-M in the project evaluation event in Yangon.*

Religious leaders, NGOs and CSO leaders, International Diplomats and other stakeholders participated in the project evaluation event on 28<sup>th</sup> March 2018 at Chatrium Hotel.

## Our Network

RfP-M has a national-level Core Group comprised of leading religious figures that oversee the day-to-day work of RfP-M, and a Committee of Executive Members that have exhibited a proven record of leadership and engagement in the promotion of peace and harmony in their respective religious communities. It also includes a Yangon-based national Women



*Fig:2. Religious leaders, Interfaith Committee members, WoFN & IYN work together on cleaning campaign in Myitkyina.*



*Fig:3. With Multi-religious stakeholders after discussion on peacebuilding and social cohesion in Yangon.*

of Faith Network (WoFN), launched in 2014, that is an interreligious action-oriented network working on development, peacebuilding, and empowerment of women as well as a national Interfaith Youth Network (IYN) which is a representative and action-oriented network of interfaith youth that conducts outreach activities to end hate speech and promote respect, understanding and tolerance in order to build a peaceful pluralist society.

Local interfaith committees consisting of township-level religious leaders and local WoFNs and IYNs lead the implementation of social cohesion, development, and climate change initiatives in Mrauk-U, Rakhine State; Patheingyi, Ayeyarwaddy Region; Pyaw, Bago Region; Meiktila, Mandalay Region and Mawlamyine, Mon Region.

## Social Cohesion

Communal conflict and outbreaks of violence have brought about suspicions and distrust amongst inter-communal groups. Political, social and economic factors have contributed to a cycle of violence that perpetuates distrust, fear and hatred amongst ethnic and religious groups. Hence, there is a need to repair relations among different communities and build a foundation of trust from which peace building and reconciliation can take place.

RfP-M harnesses the immense power of religious leaders to mitigate conflict and build social cohesion through multi-religious efforts that engage civil society and relevant government officials. Religious leaders, women of faith and youth have been trained in conflict prevention, dialogue and facilitation as well as RfP's global initiative, "Welcoming the Other" which goes beyond tolerance to promote a shared well-being and concern for the religious and ethnic

“other”. RfP-M’s national and local networks promote social cohesion through targeted activities that address the fear, mistrust, rumors and socio-economic drivers of conflict.

## Climate Change

Flooding, drought, and cyclones have threatened food security, livelihoods, and peace across the country. Extreme weather events threaten the fragile stability in many parts of Myanmar, particularly in Rakhine State and the Ayeyarwady Region. In these communities, extreme weather events have resulted in increased competition for scarce resources, thereby compounding existing intercommunal tensions. With this in mind RfP-M has engaged its WoFNs and IYNs to build trust and understanding among diverse communities and raise their awareness to enable them to come together and take collaborative actions to prevent and mitigate the adverse impacts of climate change.



*Fig:4. Conducting climate change awareness training for local interfaith communities in Kyaikmaraw, Mon State*

RfP-M is also working to alleviate social tensions and strife after a natural disaster through the empowerment of the local IYNs and WoFNs in Rakhine and Patheingyi. The networks are engaged



*Fig:5. Tree Planting- Religious leaders, WoFN and IYN as symbolic action on peacebuilding in diverse communities when Japanese delegates visited to Patheingyi.*

in peacebuilding through interreligious dialogues and by providing peacebuilding trainings to both network members and influential community actors within their townships. These trainings will galvanize communities to overcome future social hostilities caused by climate change, natural disasters and other socio-political reasons.

## A HIGH- LEVEL MULTI-RELIGIOUS DELEGATION TO MYANMAR

The international delegation consists of senior-most leaders of Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism and Islam. International delegates engaged with Myanmar national religious, governmental and civil society actors to better understand the religious, cultural, political and socio-economic challenges the country is facing and to discern multi-religious responses to those challenges, and to explore ways to advance peace through dialogue and common action.



*Fig.6. Religious leaders, Diplomats, Government Officers, WoFN, IYN in Myanmar.*

The international delegations met with **H.E. State Counsellor Daw Aung San Suu Kyi** and delivered a multi-religious pastoral letter to the peoples of Myanmar. The letter harbored a future relationship of respect and sustainability with our environment, compassion and appreciation for fellow citizens of the country, and a sense of community with neighboring countries and within the international community.



*Fig.7. High-level Delegations met H.E. State Counsellor Daw Aung San Suu Kyi at Nay Pyi Taw.*

The selected representatives from national and international delegations visited Sittwe and Maungdaw, Rakhine State, on 26-28 May to observe the current situation and engaged in dialogue with key local stakeholders.



*Fig.8. Selected High-level Delegations visited to Maungdaw, Rakhine State.*

The meeting between the high-level multi-religious delegation and government representatives, including the Minister for Religious Affairs; Minister for International Development; and Minister for Social Welfare, Relief and Resettlement, was marked by a constructive spirit of commitment and cooperation. There was an understanding of the context and the current



*Fig:9. H.E. State Counsellor Daw Aung San Suu Kyi*

violence affecting the peoples of Myanmar. The delegation also shared its commitment to positive action and cooperation to be advanced by religious leaders from Myanmar and their counterparts from other parts of the world.

After interacting with the delegation, **State Counsellor Daw Aung San Suu Kyi** appreciated its efforts and called the religious leaders to accompany their communities in expanding the concept of happiness to include a place for others. She noted that everywhere in the world, including Myanmar, some people are left behind. By including the other, those left behind, the mandate for peace and development can be advanced.

She noted the critical role of religious leaders in reminding their faithful of peace and loving kindness and leading them to action and working together. A transformed people, encouraged by their religious communities to advance a shared desire for peace, can usher in progress for all. She was positive about the future steps planned for continuing dialogue and multi-religious cooperation. The high-level delegation representing the Buddhist, Christian, Hindu and Islamic traditions also agreed to widely disseminate this call for peace both within and beyond their communities.

In response to the situation in Rakhine State, the letter notes: We encourage the Union Government to take full responsibilities for a thorough and transparent investigation into multiple crimes perpetrated in Rakhine State and elsewhere. We urge the Union Government to include in this effort the entire population such as the Rakhine, Myo, That, Dynet, Khamee, Kamen and Hindu.

Daw Aung Sun Kyi welcomed the delegation's offer of multi-religious solidarity and accompaniment as a track 1.5 mediation for humanitarian response and peace building in Rakhine State, as well as in other ethnic conflict situations. The letter stated: "In search for a solution based upon human dignity and shared well-being and from the perspectives of global responsibility sharing, we call for an international conference with concerned States, United

Nations, ICRC and other relevant international actors to address the critical humanitarian issues facing Myanmar.”

The letter noted the “vulnerability of those living within Rakhine State, those suffering in refugee camps in neighboring Bangladesh, and those desiring dignified and safe return to the places they know to be their homes in Myanmar. We call for the exploration of global sharing schemes. The proposed international conference should also address the suffering of people affected by other internal conflicts, including displaced populations from the most recent escalation of armed conflicts in Kachin and Shan States.”

## RELIGIONS FOR PEACE ADVISORY FORUM ON NATIONAL RECONCILIATION AND PEACE IN MYANMAR

The inaugural Religions for Peace Advisory Forum on National Reconciliation and Peace in Myanmar (RfP Advisory Forum) convened at Myanmar International Convention Centre II in Nay Pyi Taw, Myanmar on 21-22 November 2018, succeeded in creating “open space” for all sectors in Myanmar—governmental, military, ethnic groups, civil society and religious groups—to earnestly seek together a common path for peace. The Forum is designed to help all stakeholders engage in free and open dialogue on how to address the concrete challenges the country faces.



In the opening ceremony, **H.E. State Counsellor Daw Aung San Suu Kyi**, affirmed the importance of the RfP Advisory Forum, noting the vital role of Myanmar’s religious communities in convening it. In addition to their role as conveners, she noted that “placing emphasis on interfaith dialogue as a path to peace underscores the vital and indispensable role that the religious leaders play in shaping a peaceful world.” Her Excellency underscored her conviction that peace is “positive,” more than the absence



of conflict and must include a foundation in

essentially positive values. Also in the opening ceremony General Mutu Sae Po, Chairman of Karen National Union (KNU) and Chairman of the Peace Process Steering Committee (PPST) stated that loving kindness is the shared message of all religions and this could serve as the basis for all stakeholders to work together for peace.

The *RfP* Advisory Forum **Co-Chairs Cardinal Charles Bo, U Myint Swe, and Bishop Gunnar Stålsett**, stated that the Forum is aimed to overcome anger, hatred and revenge with forgiveness and compassion, to build trust and confidence, and to develop common action for peace and reconciliation. The *RfP* Advisory Forum included over 100 key stakeholders for national reconciliation and peace in the country. These included Myanmar and international senior religious leaders, senior representatives of the Myanmar government and the military, parliamentarians from ruling and opposition parties, ethnic organizations, and foreign governments, UN agencies, international and national NGOs, civil society groups and experts. The Opening Ceremony was attended by over 300 participants including Vice Presidents U Myint Swe and U Henry Van Thio, Pyithu Hluttaw Speaker U T. Khun Myat, Amyotha Hluttaw Speaker Mahn Win Khaing Than, Deputy Commander-in-Chief of Defence Services Commander-in-Chief Vice-Senior General Soe Win, and Karen National Union Chairperson Saw Mutu Sae Poe and representatives of ethnic armed organizations.

## Multi-religious Vision of Peace and Development in Myanmar

Participants reaffirmed the Letter to the Peoples of Myanmar issued in May 2018 by Buddhist, Christian, Hindu and Muslim leaders from Myanmar and across the region, which presented a multi-religious vision of peace and development based upon the values of compassion, shared well-being and justice embedded in the country's religious traditions. They shared a strong conviction that the people of Myanmar have profound wisdom and courage to overcome their common challenges, heal the wounds of the past, and advance national reconciliation and peace.

The multi-religious vision for Myanmar was expressed as a harmonious and prosperous democracy built on the foundation of human dignity, human rights and international law.

## Religion and Peacebuilding

Participants recognized that Buddhist, Christian, Islamic and Hindu traditions in Myanmar have shared values and commitments to advance reconciliation and build peace through practising loving kindness, compassion, tolerance, care and self-sacrifice.

It was underscored that the misuse of religion and/or race to divide people should be countered by authentic interpretations and practices of religions.

Participants were committed to engaging in open and honest dialogue among all stakeholders with differing positions and views to overcome anger, hatred and revenge with forgiveness and compassion, to build trust and confidence, and to develop common action for peace and reconciliation.

There were frequent references to the importance of teaching and promoting tolerance as a key to building trust between alienated groups. It was proposed that the International Day of Tolerance which is globally celebrated on November 16th every year, could be seized by state and non-state actors and institutions as a nationwide opportunity to promote and teach tolerance and mutual respect.

## Education

Participants acknowledged the government's effort to proclaim its policies of non-discrimination, promotion of critical thinking and inclusivity, and agreed to advance an inclusive implementation of such policy.

Participants were encouraged to work together with the government on policy adoption and implementation to provide



*Fig: 12. Discussion of Education Group*

children and youth with equal access to quality education regardless of their religion, ethnicity, gender, socio-economic status, or places of residence.

Recognizing the importance of Myanmar language in the national curriculum, it was noted that the promotion of the mother tongue curriculum was a way to create an inclusive peace-oriented society.

It was emphasized that all children and youth severely affected by conflicts should be given special care and support to ensure their access to quality education with freedom of movement and protection wherever needed. This was particularly emphasized concerning Rakhine and other conflict areas.

It was suggested that religious communities support and work with the government in developing a peace-oriented national curriculum on a basic introduction to the world's major religious traditions as part of civic education for all public schools.

It was proposed that a national peace education curriculum for public schools and other non-formal education shall be developed to educate children and youth about fundamental values and issues to promote multi-religious and multi-ethnic harmony.

## Equal Rights and Responsibilities for All Ethnic and Minority Groups

It was underscored that a common future should be built upon a shared commitment to human dignity, equality, inclusivity and unity in diversity. It was reiterated that all parties should unilaterally declare a ceasefire to achieve an immediate cessation



*Fig: 13. Discussion of Equal Rights and Responsibilities for All Ethnic & Minority Group*

of hostilities thereby relieving the suffering of peoples and advancing the peace process.

Participants advocated strengthening common actions based on fundamental values shared by religions in Myanmar.

Participants encouraged all relevant state and non-state actors to eliminate narcotic production and trafficking.

## Women's Empowerment and Participation

The increasing leadership of women in peacebuilding was seen as a great contribution to a lasting peace. All religions should review their responsibility in countering discrimination against women.

Participants called for civil society organizations and religious institutions working with the government and local authorities to further strengthen women's participation in decision making in political, economic, social, cultural and other areas at different levels from household, grassroots communities to the state levels.

Participants also emphasized that transforming mindsets of people on gender issues should start from families and engage with children and youth. It was proposed that religious institutions should play a greater role in changing peoples' mindsets towards gender equality.

Participants lamented that violence and discrimination against women are still prevalent at home, in conflict areas and in the society at large. They called for close cooperation with the government and relevant partners in addressing such violence and discrimination and overcoming the prevailing culture of impunity. Participants emphasized the need for speedy bureaucratic and legal procedural reforms to protect women from violence.



*Fig: 14. Discussion of Women's Empowerment and Participation Group*

To make gender-sensitive policies and programs, it was proposed that more women need to participate in the decision-making process including legislative and executive bodies. The use of a gender quota system should be considered. It was noted that quantities are important but also quality should be ensured and that this applies both to men and women.

Participants called for appropriate legislation to recognize informal economic contribution of women at home and in communities based upon research and statistics. Economic empowerment can be implemented through formal and informal education, skills development and changing mindsets. Such programs cannot be implemented solely by the government. It requires a collaboration of government-private sector and civil society partnership.

## Youth Empowerment and Engagement

Participants stated that the future of Myanmar depends on empowerment and education for youth. A transfer of wisdom and experience to the younger generation through youth engagement in decision-making processes in different areas and at different levels is necessary for a long-term peace-building. Youth participation and engagement in the peace process should, therefore, be further advanced.



*Fig: 15. Discussion of Youth Empowerment and Engagement Group*

It was recognized that polarization among youth along ethnic and religious lines is increasing. Participants advocated enhanced participation of youth in the peace process, and to strengthen inter-religious and inter-ethnic networking of youth at different levels.

It was noted that the spread of social hostility by social media is prevalent and that youth are seriously affected. Participants called for common action to mobilize and engage religious and interreligious youth networks across the country to counter hate speech and to advance a positive use of social media.

## Identity, Diversity and Common Challenges in Rakhine State

Participants were encouraged by the government's willingness to implement the bilateral agreement with the government of Bangladesh and a tripartite agreement with UNHCR and UNDP. It was recognized that creating conditions needed for the voluntary return of



displaced persons to Myanmar in a safe, secure and dignified way is crucial. The returnees should be guaranteed access to basic services and freedom of movement, and conditions for a sustainable livelihood.

Participants supported a planned voluntary and safe return of verified refugees from Bangladesh to their places of origin with proper protection and accompaniment by agencies such as ICRC and UNHCR.

Participants expect the government's Independent Commission of Enquiry to establish the facts and seek accountability by carrying out an independent and impartial investigation of the atrocities and human rights violations.

Participants recognize that fair citizenship status is the basis for freedom of movement and access to basic services such as health and education. In this regard, appreciation was expressed for a proposal to set up a governmental working committee with legal experts to address issues of all aspects of statelessness in accordance with international laws.

The RfP Advisory Forum on National Reconciliation and Peace is a process that will continue for two years. In between Forum sessions, RfP will work with the government and other stakeholders to take concrete follow-up actions recommended by the Forum.

## ASIA INTERFAITH YOUTH PEACE CAMP IN MYANMAR

In December 2018, a regional youth network, RfP Asia & Pacific Interfaith Youth Network (APIYN), organized with the theme “*Taking Action on Climate Change through Interfaith Cooperation*” annual camp in Myanmar with youth delegates from 19 Asia countries. The Camp is co-organized by ACRP Seoul Peace Education Center (SPEC), RfP Asia, and RfP Myanmar. From this camp, the youth network has been strengthened as they managed to exchange their experiences, respect each other’s culture and traditional practices.



*Fig: 17. Discussion of the Youth from different countries on Taking Action on Climate Change through Interfaith Cooperation.*

From this Youth Peace Camp, the youth came to understand and respect the faith of each religion which is leading to social cohesion and cooperation to relate between their doctrine and environmental issues.

From the field workshop at a local Buddhist community outside of Yangon, the youth have learned about cleanliness, preservation of nature, how to maintain the earth and environment through the tree planting activity. By experiencing a brief meditation, the youth gained inner peace, release of stress, learned how to handle their tolerance and enhance empathy and kindness towards one another.



*Fig: 18. Visited to Pann Pyo Lat Monastic Education School in Kyauk Tann Village, Bago.*

Through our commitment to deep and respectful listening and honest dialogue among different actors with diverse views, we hope that the Religions for Peace activities will serve as an instrument for multi-religious and multi-stakeholder action to advance national reconciliation and peace in Myanmar.

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