Lebanese Youth Reject Hate Speech against Refugees

**Beirut, Lebanon | February** RfP Deputy Secretary General Rev. Sugino and Program Officer for Youth Ms. Elida Jbeili had a series of meetings with inter-religious and faith-based organizations in Lebanon to work towards the building of Religions for Peace Lebanon.

H.E Dr. Mohammad Sammak, Co-President of RfP, Secretary General of the National Committee for Muslim-Christian Dialogue, stressed in his meeting with Rev. Kyoichi Sugino that the importance of inter-religious dialogue is as necessary as it was after the end of the Lebanese Civil War in 1990.

"We need the next generation to continue to engage in inter-religious dialogue and we need to pass the torch over to them. It's imperative that the culture of continuity is passed on from one generation to the next, especially here in Lebanon and in the broader Middle East and North Africa region," said Dr. Sammak.

They also met with Fr. Michel Jalakh, Member of RfP MENA Council, Secretary General of the Middle East Council of Churches, who stressed the importance of religious unity:

"The Arab World has diversity with many cultures and many religions, we have lived this diversity for many years and we can live this reality today. An attempt to divide between Sunnis and Shias, between Christians and Muslims should be countered by our collaborative interfaith action. In Teheran, we have Sunnis and Churches, in Saudi Arabia, we have Shias, In Lebanon, we have many religious communities and we can live this simplistic vision of this region. It is easy to divide. It is harder to unite. We can live together when we talk each other, and we find common humanity,"

The RfP Global Interfaith Youth Network (GIYN) harnesses the energy and commitment of religious youth leaders all over the world to advance the mission of multi-religious cooperation for peace.

The Network gained full momentum in 2006 when the six regional inter-religious youth networks were launched in Asia, Africa, Europe, North America, Latin America & the Caribbean and the Middle East.

Today, RfP GIYN is developing programs to stop war, end poverty and protect the earth.
Religions for Peace Multi-Religious Innovative Youth Prize was awarded to multi-religious youth tackling three global concerns: Countering Violent Religious Extremism, Refugee Crisis and Climate Change.

Religions for Peace partner Forum for Development, Culture and Dialogue (FDCD) is the recipient of the prize for the refugee crisis currently being experienced in Lebanon. A country of four million inhabitants, who in the last six years has received around 1.5 million Syrian refugee. The RfP-FDCD “Welcome” project will bring together Syrian and Iraqi refugee youth as well as multi-religious youth from the host country to foster and cultivate a culture of “Welcoming the Other” through workshops, cultural exchange and trainings.

Based in Beirut, Lebanon, with a regional outlook, the Forum for Development, Culture and Dialogue (FDCD) founded in 2004 offers workshops, conferences, and dialogue sessions to enable society to approach conflicts in a non-violent way.

FDCD has a history of working on empowering youth and women from all the various religious and socio-political backgrounds in Lebanon to tackle violent religious extremism, engage in a yearlong inter-religious dialogue program, and equip them to become active citizens. They also have organized sports activities and events such as the most recent “Cycle for Peace” with Syrian child refugees and local Lebanese children.

One of the FDCD’s project is titled “Lebanon a Better Image” (LBI) The acronym “LBI” means “my heart” in Arabic. This project aims to address daily social issues while generating a concrete vision of a peaceful Lebanon.

The core of LBI is a group alumni who participated in FDCD workshops over the past few years. They hail from different religious and academic backgrounds and are passionate and dedicated to peacebuilding in their communities. They are active, motivated and highly involved in planning, implementing and monitoring activities.

Another flagship activity are the summer youth camps that FDCD organizes annually.

“The youth camps really change the youth because it lets them stay with each other for a longer period where they are forced to understand each other,” said Ms. Fadwa Ghaddar, the Peacebuilding and Conflict Resolution program coordinator. Ms. Radwa Salah, Program Manager at FDCD, stated that “Nurturing peace and diversity is something that can be done just as violence and extremism is fostered. The refugee crisis is the biggest challenge to Lebanon. As a host country and for the refugees themselves, politically, economically and socially.” She experienced this first hand when she visited a refugee camp and saw the dismal and increasingly deteriorating situation there. She added that curfews are implemented in certain municipalities and hate speech is intensifying against the Syrians.

Muslim and Christian youth leaders conducted an in-depth analysis of the multi-faceted challenges the country is facing in the short and long-term, and concluded with a renewed sense of commitment for the importance of inter-religious dialogue and action by youth leaders.

The “Welcome” workshop will be conducted in March, 2017 with dozens of Lebanese, Syrian and Iraqi religious youth participants. This workshop aims to provide a common space for men and women to express themselves equally. Equal numbers of males and females from different religious background will be invited to participate in all activities. The two-day workshop will include an outing to visit cultural sites in Lebanon to allow the host community to “Welcome” the
refugees and a cultural night- where all the participants will be able to represent their country, traditions and share their culture with each other.

After the workshop, the participants will have access to a social media network guided and managed by the participants to communicate and expend the message of tolerance and mitigate the increase of hate speech among youth.

Interfaith Unity, Not Division, After Anti-Semitic Vandalism
By Amy Endres, Intern for Global Interfaith Youth Network

St. Louis | February After a Jewish cemetery was vandalized in St. Louis, Missouri, Maharat Rori Picker Neiss [Coordinator of the International Youth Committee] was among the first calling for unity in the midst of strife. A total of 154 tombstones in Chesed Shel Emeth cemetery were toppled during the vandalism. In January, prior to the February vandalism, the St. Louis Jewish community had received two threatening anti-Semitic phone calls.

The religious leaders of St. Louis gathered together to condemn the vandalism. Because of the importance of religion in the region as well as its relatively small size, leaders consciously forged relationships between faiths, especially in the face of strife. A board director at the Muslim organization CAIR-MO noted the closeness he felt to other leaders by saying, "We’re not calling the Jewish Community Relations Center, we’re calling Rori [Picker Neiss, executive director], who’s on my cell phone.”

Picker Neiss led an interfaith vigil held at the cemetery soon after the vandalism was discovered. Deacons, muftis, rabbis and other leaders were present and spoke at the vigil. The governor of Missouri and the vice president of the United States also spoke and met with those in attendance. The Muslim community of St. Louis raised over $150,000 towards repairing Jewish cemeteries through a crowdfunding campaign. Once they reached the necessary funds to repair Chesed Shel Emeth, they began to give money to other cemeteries either vandalized or in disrepair.

Quoted by the local news network KBIA, Picker Neiss said at the time of the vigil, “It means so much to all of us to see everybody who has come out to show support, to show the unity of our community and to show that together we can repair anything that’s broken.”

After the vigil and the repairs to the cemetery, Picker Neiss has remained an active voice in the St. Louis region and beyond, speaking at a number of different conferences. Quoted at one of these conferences, she encouraged everyone to “Engage in challenging moments,” and build relationships that will bridge divisions.
Inter-Religious Council of Liberia Addresses Climate Change

Liberia | January & March In the spirit of the upcoming Our Earth, Our Responsibility Campaign from the R/P Global Interfaith Youth Network, the Inter-Religious Council of Liberia (IRCL) Youth Desk is focusing on the earth’s protection for 2017. Their agenda for this year will focus on climate change, global warming, hunger issues, as well as child protection and extremism. IRCL believes these are the most outstanding problems that the world is facing today.

Already, they have begun conducting mini-workshops in local communities, churches, mosques and school campuses.

In January 2017, Moses F.M.D. Nemour (Youth Desk Coordinator, IRCL) was invited to the state Islamic radio station to talk to the public about climate change, global warming and child protection strategies. During the radio program, he encouraged the public to welcome others of different faiths for common action.

“Preserving our planet starts with you and me,” he said, “Let us see this to be our moral responsibility to provide guardians for our planet.” He noted that the recent extinctions of many species on Earth were the result of global warming, and asked the public to “soberly reflect” on the effects of human behavior on the planet. Among the challenges he named to be most dangerous effects of climate change were famines, droughts, and the growth of deadly diseases.

In March 2017, IRCL conducted a workshop on climate change and global warming in rural communities where young educated farmers were trained to preserve the natural vegetation. The workshop resolved to constitute common laws to keep people from burning bushes during farming, thereby preventing environmental hazards and the destruction of habitats.

In workshops hosted by IRCL, the farmers shared the effects that climate change has on their environment. Ending the three days workshop on education the young farmers committed to protecting the environment and making the Earth a better place to live.
Nairobi, Kenya | January  The Inter-Religious Council of Kenya (IRCK-RfP), in partnership with Kenya National Commission of Human Rights (KNCHR), held a forum to engage youth on countering violent extremism on 25 January in Nairobi.

IRCK-RfP stated that nurturing youth who are wise, intelligent, hardworking, responsible and peace-keeping is the pride of their society in Kenya. However, the youth sometimes feel neglected because they are barred from decision making processes. This has left them with no sense of belonging, thus cultivating radical defensive behaviors.

The youth shared factors that might lead them into engaging in malicious practices, including: unemployment, drug abuse, tribal affiliations, the strict education system causing a high number of school drop outs, lack of parental guidance, bad examples from political aspirants, peer pressure and misguided religious information.

In closing the forum, the youth in attendance pledged to stand for peace and requested that the government facilitate opportunities for youth participation when developing policies that concern them.

In addition, since this is an election year for Kenya, the youths requested the political aspirants to set good examples through conducting peaceful campaigns and including issues affecting citizens in their manifestos, rather than using inciting language. In the leadup to the general elections in August, tensions have risen between political parties and their supporters. This tension has greatly affected the youth, which they shared at the youth forum. IRCK-RfP has been active in calling upon citizens to be informed about their choices when it comes time to vote.

IRCK-RfP frequently engages the community in discussions about conflict prevention, mediation, women’s rights, youth rights, and numerous other issues. Through workshops and trainings which bring religious leaders from across Kenya together, IRCK-RfP contributes to a greater sense of unity and understanding among the people of Kenya and beyond.
**RfP EIYN at YO! Fest 2017**

**Maatricht | February** RfP, European Interfaith Youth Network led an inter-religious activity called "How much is religion up-to-date in our modern society?” at #YO!Fest 2017 (a political youth-led festival attended by 3000 young people, that took place in Maatricht, Holland, 6-8 February 2017). YO!Fest is the annual youth-led festival organised by the European Youth Forum and this year the theme was “Europe Calling,” to mark the 25th anniversary of the Treaty of Maastricht.

Europe has been experiencing turbulent development in some religious groups: countries like Germany and Austria face shrinking number of members in Christian churches, merging of parochial communities due to scarce administrative and religious personnel and tight financial situations. On the other hand, Poland's politician debate about tightening the abortion law shows that religion has a growing political influence in Poland. The E.U. has historically been home to different religions. However, with the arrival of refuges coming mainly from Muslim-majority countries and the terrorist attacks for which ISIS claimed credit, more fear and hate crimes against non-Christians can be observed. Anti-Semitism is rearing its head in many countries.

The EIYN decided to address those issues and invite the participants of YO!Fest to discuss them with youth religious leaders and youth social activists. Gabrielle Westhead (EIYN’s Core Group member, host of the activity) and Rupal Maru (IYC member) led the activity. Four panelists representing Hindu, Jewish, Muslim and Christian faiths as well as member organizations of EIYN (Coexister, Focolare, European Union of Jewish Students) then presented their ideas on how religion is beneficial to society in a discussion panel. 40 participants took a quiz on religions present in Europe, and worked together to answer several questions: Is there still a need from youth to follow religions anymore? If not, what do they follow? How can we prevent religiously motivated crimes? How can we work towards living peacefully together? How can religions solve social problems and conflicts as opposed to creating conflicts?

The participants and the panelists talked openly about their experiences and attitudes on religion and came up with ideas how to tackle the problems and work towards peaceful future in Europe.
Brazil | March Young religious leaders from Rio de Janeiro talked about Eco Justice and the construction of more just and equitable societies. The booklet "Eco Justice: Diverse Thoughts towards Common Actions" was publicly presented to help in their mission.

The RfP Latin America Interfaith Youth Network (LAIYN), the World Student Christian Federation (WSCF LAC) and the Institute of Studies of Religion (ISER) convened on Saturday, March 18th, in Rio de Janeiro in an open dialogue on Eco Justice.

Young Catholic, Protestant, Baha’i, Brahma Kumaris and Focolare representatives gathered at the headquarters of the Institute of Religion Studies in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil to discuss the concept of justice linked to ecology, economy and life with dignity. In addition to the interreligious dialogue, the meeting promoted an intergenerational dialogue in which senior religious leaders and adherents exchanged ideas in the light of what is happening, not only in Brazil, but throughout the region and how through empowering the role of young religious leaders it would increase avenues for advocacy.

One of the important points discussed was the intentionality of promoting the concept of Eco Justice, not only as justice for the environment but in all processes related to the humankind transformative actions. The absence of a fair vision has led to an environmental crisis with consequences for the most vulnerable, making them victims of floods, droughts, extreme weather events, forced displacement, increased poverty and inequality.

Summoned jointly by the three organizations described above, the meeting introduced the booklet developed by the RfP Global Interfaith Youth Network and WSCF LAC with thoughts of various religious communities and Faith Based Organizations (FBOs) on Eco Justice. The booklet is a youth outreach material that promotes a common vision of respect and care for nature by many religions.

In addition, some initiatives were presented by the convening organizations. Initiatives that aim to work with youth and students, seeking to promote cooperation in the local community of Rio to work together:

The RfP Global Interfaith Youth Network Campaign "Our Earth, Our Responsibility" was introduced as an upcoming campaign of Religions for Peace, which will promote and raise awareness within religious communities worldwide on environmental crisis and the role of religions. It will also encourage youth to participate in workshops and advocacy.

The Interfaith Convergence "Faith and Climate" was launched, convened by several Latin American and Brazilian organizations, which will bring together young people from different religions, faith traditions and countries of the region from April 30 to May 4, in Rio de Janeiro. They will gather to discuss the global context, to reflect on and train themselves as environmental activists from their spiritualities and traditions of Faith.

"Eco Justice: Diverse Thoughts towards Common Actions" available here: https://issuu.com/fumecalc/docs/rflp_publicaciona5_web

The English and Portuguese version of the booklet will be available soon.
RfP Japan Youth Committee Remembers Natural Disasters in Public Seminar

Japan | February  Religions for Peace Japan Youth Committee held a public seminar with the theme “Supporting each other,” on 19 February at Goju-no-to (a five-story Buddhist pagoda) of Senso-ji Buddhist Temple, which is a popular tourist spot in Tokyo. A total of 110 people including Youth Board members, members of RfP Japan, and public citizens participated in the seminar.

The speakers were Mr. Seietsu Sato, who served as the fire captain in Kesen-numa, a city in Miyagi Prefecture, during the Great East Japan Disaster and the deputy fire marshal at Minami-sanriku Town, and Ms. Marina Kinjo, who is an emergency medical technician at Odawara Fire Department in Kanagawa prefecture. From their experiences of rescuing people during the disaster, participants of the seminar learned contingency plans, the concept of support, and leadership skills in the event of a natural disaster.

During the keynote lecture, Mr. Sato introduced videos and pictures of the tsunami. He explained the scene of the tragically damaging disaster and how he devoted himself to rescue others as a firefighter in Kesen-numa. Mr. Sato began as a storyteller three years after the disaster and this seminar would be his 108th time telling his story about the disaster. He explained that he suffered from not being able to save his beloved wife although he saved many lives of the others. He expressed his feeling that “this seminar at Senso-ji Buddhist Temple would be the 7th memorial service for my wife. In order to rescue all the people during a disaster, it is important that someone can take leadership based on his or her experiences.” Mr. Sato concluded the lecture by insisting that it is important for those are alive to accomplish their own mission in their lives.

Ms. Mariko Kinjo, the second speaker, became determined to find a job in which she could help people after experiencing the Great Hanshin-Awaji Earthquake in Kobe, Hyogo prefecture when she was 4 years old. She set a goal to become an emergency medical technician. While she was temporarily withdrawn from school due to not being able to balance her studies and part-time job, the Great East Japan Earthquake occurred.

Ms. Kinjo participated as a volunteer for recovery from the disaster at Minami-sanriku Town, and met Mr. Sato while rescuing people. She asked him how he can still head to the devastated area although he was affected by the disaster. Mr. Sato responded, “My action was led from the responsibility of the survivors.” Ms. Kinjo conveyed her gratitude that his words encouraged her to keep pursuing her dream. The seminar was concluded with questions and remarks.
Religions for Peace movement advocates for an effective Nuclear-Weapon Ban Treaty at the Start of UN Negotiations

United Nations | March In December 2016, the United Nations General Assembly adopted a landmark resolution to convene a conference in 2017 to negotiate “a legally binding instrument to prohibit nuclear weapons, leading towards their total elimination”. The decision ushers in a new era of possibilities after two decades of paralysis in multilateral nuclear disarmament efforts.

The nuclear weapons ban talks are the fulfilment of a long-standing demand that all countries deserve equal security. For decades, the world has pressed the handful of countries with nuclear weapons to free humanity from the nuclear danger. The very first resolution at the UN, passed in 1946, called for a plan “for the elimination from national armaments of atomic weapons.”

During the last week of March 2017, history was made, as diplomats from about 130 countries gathered at the United Nations Headquarters in New York to commence formal talks on an international treaty to ban nuclear weapons. The goal is simple: declare it illegal for any country to produce, possess, stockpile, deploy, threaten to use, or use nuclear weapons.

The treaty will further be discussed in June and July 2017, with the possibility of a final agreed upon treaty up for signature before the end of the year.

Before the negotiations on a nuclear-weapon ban treaty began, Religions for Peace (RfP) Secretary General Dr. William F. Vendley took to the stage on Saturday 25 March to address 150 civil society leaders from across the globe at the ICAN (International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons) global campaigners’ meeting that occurred on 25-26 March in New York. ICAN is a coalition of non-governmental organizations in one hundred countries advocating for a strong and effective treaty prohibiting nuclear weapons. Religions for Peace is one of the partner organizations part of this coalition.

Highlighting the role of religious communities in the struggle for nuclear disarmament, Dr. Vendley stated: "Part of RfP’s work is to support religious communities in their own teachings to connect the dots on the importance of this issue. We can see a clear evolution in religious communities that possession is, in and of itself, immoral. The ban makes manifest that it is radically abnormal, morally, for states to have these weapons. Let’s count on religious communities as strong allies in this fight to get the ban.”

Dr. Vendley also lifted up the campaigners’ handbook, Nuclear Ban Treaty Negotiation, with prefaces by Ven. Gijun Sugitani [Chair, RfP Japan and RfP International Standing Commission on Disarmament and Security] and Dr. Vendley. The Handbook was used by thousands of civil society leaders and campaigners, as well as religious communities in further intensifying education and advocacy across the globe.
Ms. Beatrice Fihn, Executive Director of ICAN spoke about the campaigners’ strategy for the UN negotiation week stating “We are hoping to get a strong treaty under international humanitarian law... The big concern is that the negotiations will drag on. That’s why we focused on the principles of what we want in the treaty and principles of what we don’t want. It’s very task oriented. Our job is to reinforce what we are ready to push for and what we are not.”

In the afternoon, the campaigners broke into small working groups. They introduced themselves and expressed their hopes and fears about the coming week of negotiations. The regional groups strategized together on how to pressure and lobby governments and regional intergovernmental bodies in their region to sign the draft treaty.

In the subsequent week of negotiating for the nuclear weapons ban treaty at the United Nations, Ms. Linnet Ngayu delivered ICAN’s recommendations for the preamble of the nuclear ban treaty, arguing that it must convey “our determination, for the sake of all humankind, to eliminate these abhorrent, earth-destroying weapons forevermore.” It must also convey “our determination, for the sake of all humankind, to eliminate these abhorrent, earth-destroying weapons forevermore”, she said. She also stressed the need to recognize victims’ rights. Read the rest of her address here.

The president of the negotiating conference, Elayne Whyte Gómez, spoke to the press about the progress made so far. She said that there had been “a very positive and constructive atmosphere” during the first week of negotiations. She considers the adoption of a legally binding instrument banning nuclear weapons by 7 July, 2017 to be “an achievable goal.” We are trying to “fill a legal gap” in international law, she said. “This will help us move towards the total elimination of nuclear weapons.”

To stay updated on the progress, visit www.nuclearban.org and follow #nuclearban.
## Interfaith Calendar for Summer 2017

### MAY

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<th>Date</th>
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<td>1</td>
<td>Twelfth Day of Ridván, Bahá'í</td>
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<td>9</td>
<td>Laylat al-Bara’at or Nisf Sha‘bān, Muslim</td>
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<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Visakha Puja [Buddha Day], Buddhism</td>
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<td>14</td>
<td>Lag B'Omer, Jewish</td>
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<td>16</td>
<td>'Azamath, Bahá'í</td>
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<tr>
<td>23</td>
<td>Declaration of the Báb, Bahá'í</td>
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<tr>
<td>26</td>
<td>Ramadán begins, Muslim</td>
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<td>28</td>
<td>Ascension of Bahá'u'lláh, Bahá'í</td>
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<tr>
<td>30</td>
<td>Shavuot [Feast of Weeks], Jewish</td>
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### JUNE

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<td>Pentecost, Christian</td>
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<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Martyrdom of Guru Arjan Dev, Bahá'í</td>
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<td>16</td>
<td>Lailat al-Qadr, Muslim</td>
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<td>21</td>
<td>Lailat al-Qadr, Muslim</td>
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<td>25</td>
<td>Ramadan ends, Muslim</td>
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<td>26-28</td>
<td>'Id al-Fitr, Muslim</td>
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### JULY

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<td>9</td>
<td>Martyrdom of the B’áb * Ba Asalha Puja Bu, Bahá'í</td>
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<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Ulambana - Obon, Buddhist/Shinto</td>
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<tr>
<td>23</td>
<td>Khordad Sal (Birth of Prophet Zaranthushtra), Zoroastrian</td>
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Send us your news and work, and we'll include it in the next newsletter!

Questions, comments, or news? Kindly contact Ms. Elida Jbeili Youth Program Officer Religions for Peace–International 777 United Nations Plaza, 9th Fl. New York, NY 10017 +1 (212)687-2163 | ejbeili@rfp.org

**Religions for Peace**

Different Faiths, Common Action.

Since its founding in 1970, *Religions for Peace* has been guided by the vision of a world in which religious communities cooperate effectively for peace, by taking concrete common action. *Religions for Peace* is committed to leading efforts to advance effective multi-religious cooperation for peace on global, regional, national and local levels while ensuring that the religious communities organized on these same levels assume and exercise appropriate leadership and ownership of these efforts.

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