

International Center for Religion & Diplomacy

AZAD KASHMIR/LADAKH RECONCILIATION MISSION

by

Brian Cox

Introduction

On September 2, 2003 the International Center for Religion & Diplomacy conducted its tenth mission to the Indian side of the Line of Control that included activities in Ladakh and Delhi. It conducted its fourth mission to the Pakistani side of the Line of Control that included activities in Bhurban.

Team members for various parts of the mission included: Brian Cox (ICRD Senior Vice President for Dispute Resolution Training and Kashmir Project Leader) and John Parsons (Reconciliation Institute Associate).

Trip Objectives and Results

- 1. To conduct a faith-based reconciliation seminar for 30 participants in Leh September 5 – 8, 2003.**

Team

Team members included: Brian Cox (USA), John Parsons (USA), Firdous Syed (Kashmir), Aijaz Malik (Kashmir), Karamat Qayoom (Kashmir), Daoud Iqbal (Jammu), Shaheed Sleem (Jammu), R. K. Bharti (Jammu), Tsering Tsomo (Ladakh), Mohammed Ramzan (Ladakh), Chander Khanna (Kashmir).

Firdous Syed served as the Convener of the seminar. Brian Cox and John Parsons made the presentations and core group members from Jammu, Kashmir and Ladakh served as small group leaders and as the advance team. The advance team traveled by road from Jammu to Srinagar to Kargil to Leh. They followed up on the work of Mohammed Ramzan and Tsering Tsomo in solidifying participants from both Kargil and Leh. Chander Khanna served as the prayer and fasting component of the team.

Participants

There were a total of 38 participants with 12 Ladakhi Buddhists from Leh, 12 Ladakhi Muslims from Leh, 5 Ladakhi Muslims from Kargil, 3 Kashmiri Muslims from the valley, 2 Kashmiri Muslims from Jammu and 1 Kashmiri Pandit from Jammu. Participants were recruited by core group members and represented a combination of professionals/intellectuals and students. There were attorneys, civil servants, journalists, educators, Buddhist lamas (monks) and business people. Both the President of the Ladakh Buddhist Association and the President of the Ladakh

Muslim Association were participants. There were six Buddhist lamas (monks) and the Director of the Central Institute for Buddhist Studies. The age range of participants was 20 – 70 with the vast majority being under 40 years of age.

Venue

The seminar was held at the Hotel Shambha-la in Leh.

The Seminar

The seminar began on Friday morning, September 5 at 10:00am and concluded on Monday, September 8 at 12:30pm.

This was the sixth seminar on the Indian side of the Line of Control. It was the first seminar in Ladakh and the first seminar between primarily Buddhists and Muslims. We utilized the Reconciliation Basic Seminar (Gandhian Edition) which consists of a series of presentations, small group exercises and a reconciliation service to teach eight core values of faith-based reconciliation, train participants in reconciliation/peacemaking skills and provide a climate for God's work of transformation in human hearts.

The various seminar presentations were assigned as follows:

- Introduction: The Journey of Reconciliation: Brian Cox
- Reconciliation As A Moral Vision: Brian Cox
- Building Bridges: John Parsons
- Demolishing Walls of Hostility: John Parsons
- Conflict Resolution: John Parsons
- Social Justice: Brian Cox
- Healing Relationships: Brian Cox
- Healing The Wounds of History: Brian Cox
- Basis of Unity: John Parsons
- Becoming An Instrument of Reconciliation: Brian Cox

The presentations were based on the reconciling principles of Jesus of Nazareth but included reconciliation/peacemaking tenets from both the Islamic and Buddhist traditions. The materials were well received by the participants as being respectful of their religious traditions and, yet, stretching to new insights and a new sense of openness with one another. Each participant received a presentation packet (presentation outline and exercise) at the beginning of each presentation. During the Closing Circle on the final morning each first time participant received a complete training manual that included detailed outlines and supplementary materials.

The small group exercises were helpful in facilitating relationship building, discussion and teaching new skills. The exercises included: sharing one's life journey in relationship building, dialogue on a contentious issue, identifying core values, analyzing hostility toward other groups, examining the complexities of personal and group privilege, a conflict scenario involving principled negotiation and mediation, analyzing a broken relationship, engaging in an honest

conversation about history and identifying historical wounds, and instruction about starting reconciliation cell groups. The participants found the exercises intellectually and emotionally stimulating. We noticed a distinct change over the course of the seminar in the level of engagement and openness, particularly with the Buddhist lamas.

Since a key component of the seminar involves transformation of hearts and relationships, the Service of Reconciliation is always a key component. We witnessed numerous public apologies and extensions of forgiveness between Buddhists and Muslims, between residents of Leh and Kargil. The imam of the leading mosque in Leh was present and was visibly moved by the experience.

Faith-Based Component

This seminar represented the greatest challenge from a theological perspective. Muslims come from the Abrahamic tradition and are strongly monotheistic. Buddhism is a derivative of Hinduism and is essentially atheistic, although we learned that in the Tibetan strain of Buddhism the Buddha is revered as an incarnation of deity. The challenge surfaced with regard to the principle of submission to God, one of the eight core values of faith-based reconciliation. However, we resolved this issue by explaining that as people of faith that we honored Buddhists as fellow people of faith who were submitted to a higher authority (ie. The dharma) that shaped their worldview and ethical life. They were pleased by this understanding and were able to make the translation into their own context.

Conclusion

This was the sixth seminar on the Indian side of the Line of Control and the first seminar in Ladakh. Based on the responses of participants we expect that two or three cell groups will begin in Leh and one cell group in Kargil. We have now established a working base in all three regions of Jammu & Kashmir. Our master plan for faith-based reconciliation in Kashmir is slowly coming to fruition.

2. To conduct a faith-based reconciliation seminar for thirty participants in Bhurban September 11 – 14, 2003.

Team

Team members included: Brian Cox (USA), John Parsons (USA), Shah Ghulam Qadir (Azad Kashmir), Amjad Yousef (Azad Kashmir), Ashique Hamdani (Azad Kashmir) and Tahir Aziz (Azad Kashmir).

Shah Qadir (Minister of Finance of Azad Kashmir and Chairman of the Kashmir Institute for International Relations) and Amjad Yousef (President of KIIR) served as the conveners of the seminar. Brian Cox and John Parsons made the presentations. Ashique Hamdani (General Secretary of KIIR) served as the logistics coordinator and Tahir Aziz (ICRD Senior Associate) served as the prayer and fasting component of the team.

Participants

There were a total of 34 participants, all Kashmiri Muslims who were carefully selected by Shah Qadir and Amjad Yousef. There was a range in age from 20 – 40 years, men and women. There were numerous attorneys, directors of social service agencies, journalists, engineers, professors, physicians, two members of parliament, a member of the Jammu & Kashmir Executive Council (the upper house of the Parliament), the son of the prime minister as well as the son of the deputy speaker of the parliament. Clearly we were dealing with the leadership class of Azad Kashmir.

Venue

The seminar was held at the Pearl Continental Hotel in Bhurban in Pakistan located two hours from Islamabad and thirty minutes from the border of Azad Kashmir. This site was chosen so that the seminar would not be besieged by journalists.

The Seminar

The seminar began on Thursday afternoon, September 11 at 3:00pm and concluded on Sunday, September 14 at 1:00pm.

This was our first seminar in Azad Kashmir, on the Pakistani side of the Line of Control. It had been originally scheduled for March 2003, but was postponed due to the war in Iraq. At the beginning we encountered the normal reservations and suspicions. We utilized, once again, the Reconciliation Basic Seminar (Abrahamic Edition) which is explained earlier in this report. The presentations, materials and small group exercises were essentially the same as the Leh seminar with the exception that we adapted them to a strictly Islamic context. The participants found both the presentations and exercises extremely stimulating and challenging. Participants began in a very reserved mode, but gradually opened up. They told us that they had never discussed the matters of the conflict on such a deep level. They especially enjoyed the conflict resolution exercise with the Kangans and Garonians. They learned new skills in principled negotiation, mediation and respectful listening. The presentation and exercise on historical wounds was probably one of the high points of the seminar for them. The Service of Reconciliation was quieter than the one in Leh. However, I learned afterward that there were many quiet expressions and experiences of forgiveness and healing that were taking place in people's hearts.

Faith-Based Component

This seminar was particularly challenging because it presented an Islamic environment that had been deeply impacted by the spirit and culture of militancy. Even these participants who represented the voice of moderation in Azad Kashmir life all agreed that armed struggle was a legitimate and necessary part of the Kashmiri cause.

Some participants were initially suspicious that we were missionaries that had come to convert them. They explained that they practice Islam in a very conservative environment which affords them little opportunity to interact with people of other faith traditions. By the conclusion of the Service of Reconciliation those fears had disappeared as they realized that we respected their

Islamic tradition and sought to strengthen their understanding of the Abrahamic mandate of faith-based reconciliation. That evening we encountered tremendous enthusiasm to be messengers of faith-based reconciliation in Azad Kashmir.

Conclusion

This seminar was the first in Azad Kashmir. As such it represents an important breakthrough in the process of regional healing. The first post seminar task will be to form a core group of the 10 to 12 participants who seem most committed to the work of faith-based reconciliation in Azad Kashmir. Shah Qadir and Amjad Yousef are in the best position to choose the core group members and they will serve as the leaders. Based on the responses of the participants we expect that there could be five to ten cell groups that would begin in various regions of Azad Kashmir and amongst Kashmiri refugees in Islamabad and Rawalpindi.

3. To conduct civil society forums in Leh and Bhurban.

We held a civil society forum at the Hotel Shambha-la in Leh on the evening of September 8. It was attended by 30 – 40 prominent leaders from Leh who were sent personal invitations. Firdous Syed and I both gave presentations that covered the nature of ICRD as well as the history and elements of our work in Kashmir. The presentations were followed by a general discussion that became quite passionate at times.

We held a public session on Friday afternoon, September 12, at the Pearl Continental Hotel in Bhurban. It was attended by both participants of the seminar as well as members of the diplomatic community based in Islamabad. I personally met representatives from the embassies of the United States, Great Britain, Germany, Russia, Spain, France, Iran, and Azerbaijan. Shah Qadir, Amjad Yousef and I made presentations. My presentation covered basically the same subjects as in Leh.

4. To conduct meetings with key individuals in Delhi that have a bearing on ICRD's work in Kashmir.

During the one day that I had in Delhi, Firdous Syed and I met with Ashok Bhan and V.K. Grover (members of the Kashmir Committee), A.S. Dulat (Prime Minister's Chief Advisor on Kashmir), Walter North (Interim Deputy Chief of Mission, U.S. Embassy), Geoff Pyatt (Chief Political Counselor, U.S. Embassy) and Sushoba Bharve (Executive Director of the Center for Dialogue and Reconciliation in Delhi). In each of these meetings I briefed them on ICRD activities in Kashmir, exchanged information about the present situation in Kashmir and sought their wise counsel as we take the next steps in our overall strategy.

Follow up

Based on the results of this trip and resources permitting, the following next steps will be taken:

1. Formation of Azad Kashmir Core Group by Shah Qadir and Amjad Yousef.
2. Leh seminar participants to begin cell groups in Leh and Kargil.
3. Bhurban seminar participants to begin cell groups in Azad Kashmir, Islamabad and Rawalpindi.
4. Firdous Syed to organize Kashmir Valley Core/Cell Group Gathering in September 2003.
5. Firdous Syed to organize Jammu Core/Cell Group Gathering in October 2003.
6. Firdous Syed and Jammu Core Group to open up and furnish IFR Jammu office.
7. Firdous Syed to hire Staff Assistant for IFR Srinagar office.
8. Faith-Based Reconciliation Movement Summit in Jammu in February 2004 for all core group members, cell group members and seminar graduates.
9. Jammu Region Reconciliation Road Show (Poonch, Doda, Jammu) in March 2004.
10. Azad Kashmir Reconciliation Seminar for 60 – 80 participants in March 2004.
11. Kashmir/Ladakh reconciliation Mission in June 2004 to include visitation of large Pandit delegation to Kashmir Valley and reconciliation seminar in Kargil.
12. Advanced Training in Southern California for Core Groups from both sides of the Line of Control in Southern California in June/July 2004.
13. Dubai Faith-Based Learning Conversation bringing together 30 middle level leaders from Kashmir Valley, Jammu, Ladakh and Azad Kashmir in August 2004.
14. Conflict Resolution Training for Shah Qadir and Amjad Yousef to be arranged.

Conclusion

Based on our activities, meetings and other interactions I would make the following observations:

First, ICRD's work in Kashmir has reached an important milestone. Our patient, step by step building process is bearing significant fruit. We now have established relationships of trust and work going on in all four regions of Kashmir Valley, Jammu, Ladakh and Azad Kashmir. We are now actively working on both sides of the Line of Control.

Second, through the seminars, core groups, cell groups, civil society forums and other activities we have established a process of sociopolitical healing which is now pointing toward the Dubai Faith-Based Learning Conversation in August 2004 as a major milestone in which middle level leaders will be brought together from all four regions and from both sides of the Line of Control. Let us bear in mind that our original goal was to create a dynamic of reconciliation and transformation in each region before attempting to bring together leaders from all the regions in a neutral location.

Third, we have established very solid partnerships of trust, affection and mutual respect with the Kashmir Institute for International Relations in Islamabad and the Institute for Reconciliation in Srinagar. Ultimately it is my hope that we can serve and empower them to be the instruments of reconciliation in the region.

Fourth, over the next year the movement of faith-based reconciliation on the Indian side of the LOC will move away from a primary emphasis on conducting seminars to more intense “shepherding” of core group and cell group members. The leadership of Firdous Syed will be vital to this process.

Fifth, the work of faith-based reconciliation in the Jammu region is ready to “take off” and become a full fledged mass movement. Toward this end we are establishing an unstaffed IFR office in Jammu as a venue for core-group members to meet and conduct other activities. We are also planning to take a calculated risk in March 2004 with the Jammu Reconciliation Road Show where core group members and I will hold large public meetings in Poonch, Doda and Jammu to spread the concept of faith-based reconciliation to the popular level.

Sixth, Dubai seems to be the best of all possible venues for the Faith-Based Learning Conversation. Our intention will be to bring 30 middle level leaders who are graduates of the reconciliation seminar together under ICRD/KIIR/IFR auspices. It would not be wise to have any involvement or funding by any government. This should be an ngo initiative with funding from private sources. It must avoid the appearance of official third party intervention in the Kashmir conflict.

Finally, we are more determined than ever that establishing a dynamic of healing, reconciliation and transformation in the region is a key to creating hope and a future for the people of Kashmir. Certainly a peace accord needs to be the centerpiece of resolving the conflict, whether it results in a plebiscite or some form of negotiated settlement. Nevertheless, the “world’s roughest neighborhood” has the potential to become a model for the place of faith-based diplomacy and the Abrahamic values in contributing to interstate and intrastate peacemaking in the twenty first century.