

Reflections on The 2nd Tokyo Peace Roundtable
(Message from the Secretary General of Religions for Peace Japan)
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The second Tokyo Peace Roundtable, "Beyond War and Towards Reconciliation: Multi-Religious Peace Roundtables," was held for three days from February 19 in 2024, organized by Religions for Peace International and Religions for Peace Japan in partnership with the United Nations Alliance of Civilizations (UNAOC). Approximately 100 participants from 16 countries, including religious leaders from conflict zones, gathered at the conference. The second roundtable was based on the statement of the first roundtable held in 2022, which called for "religious leaders to build bridges for peacebuilding," "responsibility for healing communities torn apart by war," and "continued dialogue to promote cooperation among religious leaders."

On February 21, the second roundtable concluded with the adoption of a statement that enshrined the mission and role of religious leaders against violence and conflict. As Secretary General of Religions for Peace Japan, which hosted the conference, I report on the significant points of the second roundtable.

1. Attendance of official religious representatives from both sides of the conflict

It was significant in itself that religious leaders from conflict areas of Ukraine and Palestine, both of which are considered to be at war with each other, attended the conference on the theme "Beyond War and Toward Reconciliation".

In particular, the main participants from Ukraine and Russia were religious leaders who had also attended the previous first conference and were well aware that the purpose of the conference was reconciliation. These participants did not attend as individuals, but were officially dispatched by the respective organizations to which they belonged. Furthermore, the Russian Orthodox Church is generally known to have close ties with the Russian government, while Ukrainian clerics must obtain special permission from the government and military of Ukraine before leaving the country.

This could be seen as an indication that the governments of both countries continue to constantly express their intention to continue the war, but on the other hand, they may be seeking a path toward reconciliation.

2. Adoption of the Statement

Following the first roundtable, the second roundtable adopted a statement by unanimous consent. The participants persevered in their dialogue, and the adoption of a statement with the following characteristics was considered an important outcome of the conference.

The statement first expressed the responsibility of religious leaders to be peacemakers and to foster reconciliation among war-torn communities, and then strongly condemned war and violence as *We denounce war*. In the context of the current conflict, where feelings of anger and hatred have escalated and a strong sense of hostility prevails, it is significant that religious leaders from both sides of rivalry in the conflicts, in Ukrainian and Palestinian, have made this statement. It was a demonstration of the solidarity of the religious leaders toward the end of the war.

It also affirmed the equal dignity of each person and the sanctity of life. It called for the protection of the dignity

of all human beings, regardless of friend or foe, even in a situation of war. In war, the human rights and dignity of the opposing side are often ignored, violated, and persecuted.

It also called for the depoliticization of humanitarian aid. In the Gaza Strip, humanitarian aid has not been implemented due to political maneuver, and in Ukraine, humanitarian activities have sometimes been the target of attacks. In this statement, the statement called for the separation of humanitarian assistance from politics.

Regarding the use of weapons, the statement called for an immediate halt to the use of inhumane weapons such as AIs. It also stressed that the use of nuclear weapons, along with conventional weapons, is unacceptable, despite recent references to the use of nuclear weapons by political leaders. Since the roundtable was held in Japan, the only country to have been exposed to war, it showed a strong interest in this issue.

It called for the protection of places of worship, sacred sites, and other religious institutions so that safe and free access to them would always be possible. Religious facilities are often the target of attacks by war. The conference was also attended by religious people whose religious institutions they belong to have been destroyed. This is closely relevant as an issue of freedom of faith, which is not permissible for religious people of any country. It is because they are religious people that the statement emphasized this issue.

It also recognized the need for dialogue with the media. War is rife with false information, deliberate incitement reporting, propaganda, hate speech, and other malicious information through various information operations. It called for attention to the media in such wars and appealed to encourage appropriate reporting in dialogue with the media.

And as concrete actions by religious leaders, they should provide humanitarian assistance to children and other vulnerable groups, regardless of whether they are friend or foe. Conducting exchange programs with women and youth to promote reconciliation. It called for the promotion of unity and healing among families and communities torn apart by war. It also stated the continued implementation of this Peace Roundtable.

The unanimous adoption of the statement containing the above specific actions was an explicit outcome of the second roundtable.

3. Increased trust building among participants

This roundtable is not a political or security conference, but a conference of religious leaders. One of the characteristics of religious conferences is that they are based on the teachings of God and Buddha, and that they share and learn from each other's teachings in order to envision what humanity as a whole should be and to commit themselves to action together. Religions for Peace has a common set of foundational belief that have been important in this kind of meetings. It is that “Our happiness is inherently shared. To help others is to help ourselves, and to harm others is to harm ourselves.” This belief in the concept of “Shared Security” means that one's own security can be assured only when the security of others is assured. From this belief, it is of paramount importance to recognize the interdependence of all lives, no matter how hostile and divided they may be.

This roundtable is a gathering of religious leaders from all walks of life in the midst of war. It is very difficult for two adversaries to easily come to terms with each other, no matter how much they attend with reconciliation in mind. With tens of thousands of people killed in their own countries, it would be impossible for them to immediately

open up to each other simply because they are religious. There may be family members, friends, or acquaintances who have been victimized. Or they may be concerned about the severity of the damage done to their country, and it may be natural for them to feel strong feelings of hatred. Or, even if he or she is willing to reconcile, he or she may be concerned about the feelings of those around him or her in his or her own country, and may not dare to show intimacy with a religious leader from a hostile country, and may keep his or her distance.

However, even under such circumstances, I feel that this roundtable has, albeit gradually, established a human connection between the parties to the conflict from the perspective of "Shared Security," which is the objective of Religions for Peace.

Building relationships among the parties to a conflict in such a conference is difficult. This is true even for religious leaders. At the first roundtable and the second roundtable, there were differences of opinion, and there were times when I realized how difficult it is to engage in dialogue. However, as was the case at the first roundtable, no one at the second roundtable refused to engage in dialogue and left the conference venue, and they continued to listen sincerely to the opinions of others and engage in discussion. This attitude of the religious leaders at the conference certainly contributed to mutual trust.

For the first time at the second roundtable, I became aware of the exchange of greeting with eyes and spontaneous conversations that took place between religious leaders from one conflict-affected country while moving from one conference room to another. These may seem small things, but the fact that these relationships were made naturally, and trust was built between human beings was of great significance. I believe this is the most important significance of the conference by religious leaders. At the conference, there was an opinion that politics should be the substantive resolution of conflict issues, but it goes without saying that human trust between the parties to the conflict is critically important as a precondition for political resolution. It is the role of religious leaders to build such trust. I believe that the fact that this roundtable was able to issue a statement that included concrete actions was due to the fact that a relationship of trust, even slight, had been established among the religious leaders of the parties to the conflict, and that they shared a positive attitude toward reconciliation. It is no exaggeration to say that the budding and growing of this relationship of trust is the most significant aspect of this conference.

4. Implementation of various reconciliation programs

The Second Roundtable, which included the issuance of the above-mentioned statement and confidence building among the parties to the conflict, was characterized by a comprehensive approach to dialogue that combined not only the conference but also a variety of events.

(1) Plenary Sessions and Group Discussions

The conference took two forms: plenary sessions, where official organizational views tended to be presented, and group discussions, where individual opinions could be freely expressed. Consideration was also taken to create a "safe space" to ensure that attendees were not harmed or disadvantaged in any way by what was said. To this end, the organizers agreed to set up meetings that would not be open to the public, depending on the nature of the discussion, and not to divulge the content of what was said outside of the meeting.

(2) Visits to Japanese religious institutions and cultural experiences

In order to build trust between parties in conflict areas, it is important to combine not only conference discussions but also cultural events, which is a characteristic approach of religious and cultural diplomacy. On this occasion, the participants visited Hie Shrine, a Shinto shrine, and Zojoji Temple, a Buddhist temple, both located in Tokyo, to learn about the spirit of harmony, one of the characteristics of Japanese religions. They also experienced a tea ceremony and watched a *Noh* performance at the Oomoto Tokyo Headquarters, where they came into contact with traditional Japanese culture that has been handed down from generation to generation. The fact that all participants shared these experiences over the same period of time promoted mutual understanding from new perspectives that could not be achieved through conferences alone.

(3) Exchange of Opinions with Member of Parliament

During the conference, there was also an exchange of views with 13 members of Japanese Parliament, including those involved in the "Dialogue Program with Member of Parliament" related to Religions for Peace Parliamentary Support Group and Initiatives of Change (IC) Parliamentary Support Group in the International Conference Room of the First members' office Building of the House of Representatives. Although the roundtable is a discussion among religious leaders, one of the objectives of this roundtable is to also consider cooperation with politics, since politics is indispensable in solving the problems of war. Therefore, meetings with Japanese political leaders were also set up.

The meeting with members of parliament was conducted under the Chatham-House Rule, which allows information from the meeting to be disclosed to the outside but withholds information that would identify the speaker. Recommendations were made by overseas religious leaders regarding issues of support for UNRWA and the export of Ukrainian agricultural and industrial products. These recommendations may be taken up as political issues by the Japanese government in the future.

From the outset, the roundtable envisioned a path of building trust, if possible, among the religious parties to the conflict, establishing common goals for action (a statement), and then implementing these goals (a statement). We believe that this trend can be achieved through these diverse approaches. In particular, since the implementation of the statement will require cooperation not only with religious leaders but also with other sectors, including politics, we believe it is significant that opinions were exchanged with political leaders.

5. Communication in Oversea Media

The roundtable also placed an emphasis on media dissemination, holding press conferences before and after the roundtable, and delivering the contents of the conference through the websites of Religions for Peace International and Japan, Asian Conference of Religions for Peace (ACRP), and the UN Alliance of Civilizations, as well as through the SNSs. This enabled us to confirm that within three days after the conference, it had so far been distributed in more than 10 foreign media outlets, including the Vatican, Ukraine, Russia, Greece, Thailand, Malaysia, and Australia. We consider it one of the achievements of this roundtable, which was covered by many media outlets and brought the message of this roundtable to the attention of a large number of people.

Looking back on the second roundtable, which ended three days ago, I was able to confirm the above five significant points. Religions for Peace International and the organizing and supporting organizations' passion and dedication to peace were instrumental in bringing about these accomplishments. Furthermore, it was the sincere financial contributions of each and every person associated with Religions for Peace Japan that covered the costs of holding this roundtable. Once again, considering that the conference was filled with the goodwill and prayers of so many people, I deeply appreciate the preciousness of the outcomes of this conference and believe that it is imperative that we apply them to solving real issues.

The outcome of this conference was the consensus of the religious leaders who attended. As mentioned earlier, many of these religious leaders did not participate individually, but were officially dispatched by their respective organizations, or some of them have deep ties to their respective governments. In this sense, we believe that this outcome has the potential to have a significant impact beyond the individual. However, we realize that we "do not expect special miracles to happen" and that "there are some things that religious people cannot do." Once again, we should be dedicated to the effort to fulfill our mission steadily.

The world may be shaken by one conflict and violence after another, and there may even be a sense of hopelessness in the air. There is a pervasive tendency to assume that more power is needed to confront conflict and violence, and to strengthen preparations for more battles. It is precisely in this bleak and difficult international climate that the messages and actions of trust, dialogue, cooperation, reconciliation, and forgiveness become all the more necessary. Many people are undoubtedly longing for peace. I believe that it is the mission of Religions for Peace to send out a message of encouragement, solidarity, and action to these people without ceasing. I am reminded of this after this second roundtable and keenly aware of the need for continued roundtable discussions.