



**UNHCR**

United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees  
Haut Commissariat des Nations Unies pour les réfugiés

**Religions for Peace World Assembly  
Affirmation of Welcome  
Special Session**

(Vienna Hilton Hotel, 21 November 2013 – 10:20-10:45)

**Remarks by Volker Türk  
Director of International Protection**

Doctor Vendley, Distinguished religious leaders, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am honoured to represent the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, Mr. António Guterres, during today's special session. UNHCR's work with refugees, the internally displaced and stateless persons is very much linked to the theme of this Assembly: Welcoming the other.

The institution of asylum is founded upon fundamental human values which flow, not least, from spiritual and religious traditions. Law, including international law, is nothing but an expression of how societies, or in our case the 'international community', deal with social phenomena.

Law and practice as they relate to the "other," the stranger fleeing persecution or violence and seeking protection, are social indicators. Behind these manifestations lie deeper spiritual and moral questions, including from the perspective of religious discourse.

In December 2012, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees hosted a Dialogue on Faith and Protection that explored how asylum and the notion of 'protecting the other' spring from long held religious values and traditions. All main religious value systems, firmly anchored in cultural and social traditions around the world, contribute to asylum and protecting the other, both in law and in practice.

The Dialogue prompted us to reaffirm our engagement and cooperation with faith-based organizations, faith leaders and local religious communities in discharging our core mandate of providing international protection and searching for durable solutions. It also generated a deeper appreciation of the role that faith plays in providing moral and spiritual sustenance to those we serve in times of crisis and moments of despair.

Since December 2012, thanks to the commitment and energy of UNHCR's many faith-based partners, we have compiled good practice examples and lessons learned from the work of faith-based organizations and local faith communities in contributing to protection. We are also in the process of developing training materials for UNHCR staff and partners, to equip us to cooperate better.

Most importantly, the Dialogue spawned the *Affirmation of Welcome for Faith Leaders* that we are formally launching today. I would like to put on record here my deep appreciation for the exemplary multi-faith cooperation that we enjoyed in developing the document.

The *Affirmation* serves as a call to encourage us all, especially spiritual leaders, to welcome migrants, refugees and other forcibly displaced people into our communities, and to stand together against intolerance, exclusion and xenophobia.

They are also a call to action: to preserve the right to seek asylum, to deepen dialogue and cooperation across and within faith communities, and to work toward our common goal of protecting the world's forcibly displaced and stateless persons. It is an important starting point for reaffirming the common language of protection, since these are all "the other" in one context or another.

The High Commissioner is delighted that this document will be formally launched today by a panel of representatives of the world's major religions.

To meet the many challenges of today's turbulent world, your contribution is essential to the development of a protection-based narrative that is nourished by our shared spiritual values and traditions.

Thank you.