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# International Religious Freedom and Interfaith Harmony Summit

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Islamabad

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## Introduction

The Sustainable Social Development Organization (SSDO), in collaboration with All Neighbors USA, conducted the International Religious Freedom and Interfaith Harmony Summit on April 25, 2024. This summit was attended by participants from All Neighbors USA, the President of Henry College VA, the President of 4ethne Organization USA, a US Embassy Representative, Federal Government Representatives, Members of the National and Provincial Assemblies, the National Police Bureau, Supreme Court One-Man Commission on Minority Rights, Members of Sindh Human Rights Commission and citizens belonging to diversified religious communities in Pakistan.

The primary objective of the Interfaith Harmony Summit was to foster mutual understanding, respect, and acceptance among different religious communities. The summit aimed to create a platform for open dialogue and collaborative initiatives, promoting peace and solidarity. By bringing together leaders and representatives from various faiths, the summit sought to address common challenges, dispel misconceptions, and build a foundation of trust and cooperation. The event also focused on highlighting shared values and encouraging collective efforts towards social harmony and community development. Over the past several decades, Pakistan has faced significant challenges in maintaining peace and resilience within its social fabric, resulting in interfaith hatred, differences, discrimination and violence. Educating individuals on the importance of religious tolerance, pluralism, diversity, and national unity is crucial to overcoming these challenges. The Interfaith Harmony Summit aimed to promote religious freedom and human rights for all Pakistanis, regardless of their faith, ethnicity, or background, while addressing issues related to religious extremism. The participation of international partners emphasized a collaborative effort to address religious extremism in Pakistan. The summit aimed to foster a more inclusive and harmonious society by promoting diversity and strengthening unity.

## Objectives of the Summit

- To create a platform for dialogue among religious leaders, scholars, and practitioners that emphasizes the common values shared across various faiths. This objective aims to foster mutual understanding, respect, and acceptance among different religious communities, thereby focusing on shared cultural heritage over religious tensions and misunderstandings.
- To educate individuals on the importance of religious tolerance, pluralism, and diversity, and to highlight the collaborative efforts of international partners in addressing religious extremism in Pakistan. This objective focuses on promoting national unity and ensuring the protection of religious freedom and human rights for all Pakistanis, regardless of their faith, ethnicity, or background.

## Highlights of the Event

This summit showcased a diverse gathering of participants from the US and Pakistan, all advocating for mutual respect, enhanced understanding, and social acceptance among all faith groups. The event highlighted the importance of building bridges between communities to foster a more inclusive society.

- Both national and international keynote speakers emphasized the critical importance of interfaith dialogue and cultural exchange. They addressed contemporary challenges such as intolerance, peacebuilding, interfaith harmony, social diversity, and pluralism. The speakers offered tailored solutions relevant to Pakistan's unique context, advocating for strategies to foster mutual understanding and cooperation among diverse religious and cultural communities. They highlighted the necessity of embracing diversity and pluralism as foundational elements for creating a peaceful and inclusive society.
- Panel discussions served as dynamic platforms for participants to engage in substantive discourse on various critical issues. Topics included state policies, the constitutional and legal framework, and the necessity for national strategies that encourage inclusivity. The discussions emphasized the importance of promoting the celebrated virtues of diversity and fostering pluralistic social cohesion. Participants explored ways to enhance legal and policy measures to build a more inclusive society, ensuring that the benefits of diversity are recognized and valued in all aspects of national life.
- The summit celebrated the proactive involvement of youth and local communities in enhancing local capacities for peace and national cohesion. By spotlighting grassroots engagement, the event underscored the pivotal role these groups play in cultivating a culture of tolerance and mutual understanding. It emphasized how empowering youth and local communities contributes significantly to nurturing a society where diverse perspectives are respected and valued.
- The summit concluded with commitments from both national and international stakeholders, reaffirming their dedication to advancing a more inclusive and harmonious Pakistan. These pledges highlighted a shared commitment to ongoing efforts aimed at promoting peace and strengthening social resilience across the country.

### Opening Session: Building Bridges Across Faiths: Promoting Unity in Diversity

- In the opening remarks, Syed Kausar Abbas, Executive Director of the Sustainable Social Development Organization (SSDO), emphasized the critical need for state policies that fully align with the vision articulated by Quaid-i-Azam Muhammad Ali Jinnah in his historic speech on August 11, 1947. Jinnah's speech underscored the importance of religious freedom and the rights of minorities, declaring that in Pakistan, individuals of all faiths would have the freedom to practice their religions without fear of discrimination or persecution. He famously stated, "You are free; you are free to go to your temples, you are free to go to your mosques or to any other place of worship in this State of Pakistan." Abbas highlighted SSDO's efforts to promote religious inclusivity and harmony by engaging with a wide range of stakeholders, including parliamentarians, law enforcement agencies, academia, youth, religious leaders, and citizens from various faiths. He detailed several initiatives taken by Pakistan to counter violence and promote peacebuilding, such as the National Action Plan to counter violent extremism, the launch of Paigham-i-Pakistan to promote social diversity, the





establishment of Misaq Centers by the Punjab police to foster interfaith harmony and cooperation, the recruitment of minority police officers by ICT Police and the Minority Protection Unit by the National Police Bureau to safeguard religious minorities from violence. He further remarked on the proactive responses from law enforcement agencies, state institutions, mainstream media, and the public in the aftermath of the tragic incident in Jaranwala, Faisalabad, indicating Pakistan's commitment to upholding the rights, representation, and participation of religious minorities in decision-making processes at all levels. Abbas stressed the necessity for collaborative efforts among all religious communities to promote inclusive narratives and strengthen the broader community.

- The President of All Neighbors USA, Mr. Illyas Masih, introduced the themes and aims of the Interfaith Harmony Summit, highlighting the importance of mutual understanding among different faith groups. Masih pointed out that despite being a young nation of 76 years, Pakistan is making strides towards ensuring inclusivity and non-discriminatory unification of diverse religions. Quoting Jesus Christ, he advocated for empathy, compassion, and love for one's neighbors, urging the audience to acknowledge and address the challenges faced by the nation. The diverse audience at the summit, which included participants from various religious backgrounds, engaged in meaningful dialogue to promote interfaith understanding.



- Acting Deputy Chief of the US Mission in Pakistan, Ms. Kate, emphasized in her remarks that the United States is deeply committed to safeguarding religious freedom and embracing religious diversity. She highlighted the US's annual report on International Religious Freedom and Belief as a testament to this commitment and noted that initiatives like the Interfaith Harmony Summit reflect efforts towards fostering harmony and collaboration in Pakistan. The summit featured a diverse array of speakers, including representatives from the international community and esteemed parliamentarians, who shared valuable insights on the grassroots realities of Pakistan.



- Senator Ayesha Raza Farooq, Chairperson of the National Commission on Child Rights, underscored the urgent need for discourse and discussion amid growing global intolerance and extremism. She called for all stakeholders, partners, and governments to work together to build a tolerant, just, and fair society for future generations. Ms. Farooq further highlighted the Minority Working Group within the National Commission on Child Rights, which plays a crucial role in educating children about religious diversity. By instilling a narrative of acceptance from a young age, the commission aims to foster a more inclusive and harmonious Pakistan.



- The Interfaith Harmony Summit also embodied the spirit of cooperation between Pakistan and the US. The President of Henry College VA, Dr. Jack Hays commended SSDO and All Neighbors for incorporating the essence of peace and underscored the fundamental pillars of Pakistan: Unity, Faith, and Discipline. He highlighted initiatives tailored for children and youth to strengthen religious acceptance and emphasized finding tangible solutions to grave issues to progress towards a more prosperous society.



- Dr. Joseph Knight, President of the 4ethne Organization, praised Pakistan for its rich cultural heritage and stressed the importance of active listening and understanding. He emphasized that countries with rich cultural backgrounds require not just coexistence but mutual respect and comprehension.



- At the end, the chief guest of the summit, the Governor Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK), Mr. Faisal Kareem Kundi, highlighted the importance of understanding diverse



viewpoints and promoting the idea of diversity symbolized by the white portion of Pakistan's national flag. He advocated for the dissemination of messages of inclusivity and diversity through social media and underscored the significance of the Kartarpur Corridor as a symbol of Pakistan's respect for all faiths. Kundi advocated for the reform of Pakistan's academic curriculum to incorporate themes of inclusivity and diversity. His proposal aimed to nurture a harmonious society where religious tolerance plays a central role

### Panel Discussion: Promoting Interfaith Dialogue and Understanding

The Interfaith Harmony Summit facilitated profound dialogue and mutual understanding, sparking innovative solutions to intricate issues surrounding religious diversity and harmony through vibrant panel discussions. Diverse panelists, drawing on their expertise, experiences, and best practices, greatly enhanced the audience's comprehension of sensitive topics like religious harmony and peaceful coexistence. The panelists included:

- Mr. Sukhdev Asardas Imani, a Member of the Sindh Human Rights Commission, Government of Pakistan
- Ms. Afshan Tehseen, former Chairperson of the National Commission on the Rights of Child (NCRC)
- Mr. Muhammad Shahid Khan, Senior Director of Programs and Operations at the Sustainable Social Development Organization (SSDO)
- Ms. Malalai from the Bahai Community
- Mr. Naveed Amir Jeeva, Member of the National Assembly

- The panel discussion was expertly moderated by senior journalist and development practitioner Mr. Zaigham Khan. The primary aim was to explore solutions and delve into the barriers to achieving a more inclusive Pakistan.



The discussion was structured into two distinct parts:

**Recognizing Past Mistakes:** The panelists conducted a critical examination of historical errors made by Pakistan as a nation, its government, policies, and residents. This introspection aimed to identify valuable lessons and recognize areas in need of improvement.

**Highlighting Current Initiatives and Advancements:** The second segment of the discussion centered on current initiatives and actions aimed at fostering a more inclusive society in Pakistan. Panelists highlighted ongoing endeavors to advance religious harmony and safeguard the rights of religious minorities.

### Unpacking Progress and Pitfalls: Religious Diversity in Pakistan

The panel discussion began with an introductory exploration of religious diversity in Pakistan, emphasizing the significance of exchanging ideas on sensitive issues. The initial question posed to the panelists explored areas where Pakistan has faced challenges in promoting inclusivity and discussed how these challenges have influenced extremism and radicalism.

- Mr. Shahid Khan emphasized an important point, noting that since the establishment of Pakistan, there have been efforts to forge a unified nation primarily based on religious identity. This approach, whether intentional or unintentional, contributed to a culture that did not fully embrace other faiths. This mindset of exclusion has influenced Pakistan's constitutional development and social norms, potentially exacerbating religious extremism. Khan underscored the significance of recognizing diversity and pointed to the National Action Plan as a measure to address extremist incidents, advocating for broader and more inclusive policies.
- Ms. Afshan Tehseen noted that while Pakistan has prioritized economic and political stability, peacebuilding and nation-building should also take precedence. She stressed





the need for reshaping mindsets, behaviors, and ideologies, highlighting the culture of silence and lack of dialogue as contributors to the isolation of religious sects. Tehseen underscored the importance of capacity building among the younger generation to foster inclusivity and pluralism, suggesting educational reforms and community engagement programs.



- Mr. Iqbal Ahmed Detho highlighted the misinterpretation of religion as a significant factor contributing to discrimination, exacerbated by socio-economic factors that amplify religious biases. He emphasized the importance of a nuanced understanding of religious teachings and their accurate application to foster harmony. Additionally, Detho advocated for socioeconomic reforms aimed at addressing underlying inequities that perpetuate religious discrimination.



- Mr. Sukhdev Asardas highlighted the direct linkage between political stability and socio-economic balance. He argued that the inclusion of minorities in Pakistan's political process is crucial for fostering a prosperous society. Asardas pointed out that political representation of minorities can lead to more balanced and equitable policies, ensuring that all communities are heard and respected.



- Mr. Naveed Amir Jeeva shared insights on legislative efforts and the role of the National Assembly in protecting religious freedoms. He highlighted recent laws and amendments aimed at safeguarding the rights of minorities and promoting tolerance. Amir emphasized the importance of collaborative efforts between government bodies, civil society, and religious leaders to create a cohesive society.



- Ms. Malalai from the Bahai Community discussed the unique challenges faced by religious minorities and the importance of interfaith dialogue in overcoming these obstacles. She shared examples of successful community initiatives that have fostered understanding and cooperation among different religious groups.





## Pathways to Inclusivity and Harmony: Guiding the Way Forward

Following the panelists' insights, Mr. Zaigham Khan spurred further discussion by inquiring about Pakistan's efforts and contributions to promoting inclusivity as a nation. The panelists emphasized Pakistan's progress in fostering a sustainable and harmonious society, noting ongoing initiatives aimed at promoting religious harmony and inclusivity.



- Mr. Naveed Amir Jeeva highlighted the positive effects of transitioning from a separate to a joint electoral system, which has notably narrowed the gap between religious communities. He commended initiatives like the 5% job quota for minorities, the reservation of four seats in the Senate for minority representatives, and the observance of August 11 as Minority Day. These measures aim to acknowledge the contributions of diverse religious groups and bolster their representation in Pakistan's political and social realms.
- Mr. Shahid Khan underscored several legislative advancements benefiting minorities, such as the Hindu Marriage Act, the Child Marriage Restraint Act, the establishment of the Minority Rights Commission, the One-Man Commission on Minority Rights, and the introduction of job and education quotas for minorities. These initiatives play a crucial role in protecting the rights of religious minorities and fostering inclusivity. However, he raised concerns about the government's ongoing challenges in passing legislation to prevent forced conversions of religious minorities.
- Ms. Afshan Tehseen highlighted the role of initiatives such as the establishment of the Human Rights Commission and the broadcasting of religious festivals on state television in promoting inclusivity and acceptance. She emphasized the importance of these actions in reshaping societal attitudes and fostering a culture of respect and understanding among different religious communities.
- Mr. Iqbal Ahmed Detho highlighted legislative measures like the Sindh Child Marriage Restraint Act and the establishment of institutions such as the Sindh Human Rights Commission and district peace committees. These initiatives are designed to safeguard the rights of all citizens, irrespective of their religion, and to enhance social cohesion at the local community level.
- Mr. Sukhdev Asardas highlighted the transformative role of social media platforms in disseminating messages of tolerance and acceptance, facilitating interfaith dialogue, and breaking down barriers.
- Ms. Malalai underscored the inherent human capacity for acceptance and called for a cultural shift in Pakistan towards greater understanding and tolerance among future generations. She emphasized the importance of education and awareness campaigns as pivotal in fostering this cultural transformation.
- The discussion ended with a collective call to action for stakeholders to collaborate in tackling ongoing challenges and advancing towards a more inclusive and harmonious Pakistan. The panelists' insights and recommendations emphasized the crucial role of ongoing dialogue, education, and policy reforms in reaching this objective. They reiterated that although substantial progress has been achieved, sustained efforts are essential to ensure that all citizens, irrespective of their religious beliefs, are valued and integrated into the social fabric of Pakistan.

## Concluding Remarks

In his concluding remarks, Mr. Ehsan Sadiq, Director General of National Police Bureau emphasized the critical importance of robust institutional mechanisms in addressing societal issues, asserting that no nation can truly thrive without embracing inclusivity and pluralism. He highlighted that inclusive dialogue, which solicits viewpoints and recommendations from policymakers and stakeholders, is essential for generating diverse perspectives and solutions.



He stated that the dialogue facilitated at the summit brought together a broad spectrum of participants from across Pakistan, enabling them to share valuable knowledge, experiences, and insights about coexistence. By addressing sensitive societal issues, the summit successfully bridged the gap between the general public and institutional frameworks. This inclusive approach allowed for a deeper understanding of the challenges and opportunities in fostering a more cohesive society.

Mr. Sadiq noted that the panel discussion was particularly fruitful in exploring the policy implications and implementation of existing laws. The discussion delved into how these laws can be better utilized to promote inclusivity and protect the rights of all citizens. He stressed the need for continuous engagement and collaboration among all sectors of society to ensure that the principles of equality and respect for diversity are upheld. Furthermore, Mr. Sadiq acknowledged the contributions of various stakeholders in the dialogue, including policymakers, civil society representatives, and community leaders. Their collective efforts and shared commitment to fostering a more inclusive Pakistan were seen as vital steps towards achieving lasting social harmony and national unity.

In summary, Mr. Sadiq reiterated that the summit's discussions underscored the importance of inclusivity and pluralism as foundational elements for a prosperous society. He called for sustained efforts to engage all segments of society in meaningful dialogue and collaboration, ensuring that the principles of justice, equality, and respect for diversity are woven into the fabric of the nation. The insights and recommendations generated during the summit were seen as valuable contributions to the ongoing efforts to create a more inclusive and harmonious Pakistan.

## Suggestions and Recommendations

The following suggestions/ recommendations were proposed by all the stakeholders, attended the Summit.

- Establish and reinforce institutions dedicated to monitoring and promoting religious freedom and minority rights. Ensure these institutions are well-resourced and empowered to effectively address issues and uphold inclusivity.
- Accelerate the enactment of pending legislation protecting religious minorities from forced conversions. Review and amend existing laws to ensure comprehensive protection and representation for all religious groups.

- Integrate themes of inclusivity, diversity, and tolerance into the national curriculum. Promote interfaith education programs and workshops in schools and universities to foster understanding and acceptance from a young age.
- Launch nationwide awareness campaigns using media and community events to promote religious tolerance. Encourage public dialogues and forums to share experiences and perspectives across different religious backgrounds, bridging gaps in understanding.
- Support community-based organizations and initiatives that promote interfaith harmony and minority rights. Provide capacity-building programs for religious leaders, youth, and community members to advocate for inclusivity and counter extremism.
- Promote and support the celebration of religious festivals of all communities at national and local levels. Broadcast these events on state television and other media platforms to foster appreciation and respect for diverse traditions.
- Utilize social media platforms to disseminate messages of tolerance and counter narratives of hate and extremism. Develop online campaigns and digital tools that encourage dialogue and education about religious diversity.
- Implement economic programs aimed at improving the socio-economic status of minority communities. Ensure equal access to social services, including healthcare and education, for all religious groups to promote social equity.
- Encourage greater political participation of minority communities by ensuring their representation in decision-making processes. Promote the establishment of minority advisory councils to provide a platform for minority voices in governance.
- Establish mechanisms to monitor the implementation and impact of policies and programs promoting religious harmony. Regularly review and assess the effectiveness of these initiatives, making necessary adjustments based on feedback and evolving needs.



