

FEATURE: Diplomacy of the conscience – The Holy See at the United Nations

7 February 2017 – Ever since 1964, when it was informally accepted to the United Nations General Assembly, the Holy See has had a permanent seat at international discussions and used its observer status to go on record about matters of peace and human dignity.

“We consider the United Nations not only important but in itself very useful for humanity,” Archbishop Bernardito Auza, Apostolic Nuncio and Permanent Observer of the Holy See to the United Nations, told *UN News*.

He went on to say: “The Holy See, the Catholic Church itself, appreciates and considers the United Nations a very important institution for all the nations to come together and discuss problems and even enjoy together what is common.”

The priorities of the Holy See for the year are similar to key UN goals – among them, the quest for peace, providing assistance to migrants and refugees, and nuclear disarmament.

The Holy See is a nearly 2,000-year old term that refers to the international sovereignty of the Pope, or leader of the Roman Catholic Church. The Vatican City State is the geographic property that ensures that sovereignty.

This makes the Holy See the only religious entity represented among the 193 UN Member States and Palestine, the other non-member observer state.

What’s more, in a diplomatic world where Member States wrangle for a seat on the Security Council or a senior UN job, the Holy See turned down an opportunity for GA Membership in 2004, when Switzerland, the only other Permanent Observer state at that time, gained full membership.

“That was a very hard decision to make. Saint John Paul II was already very sick at the time, in 2004. I remember very well. It was he himself who took the decision that we should remain as a Permanent Observer state,” the Archbishop recalled. “The fundamental reason is that so that we could remain neutral.”

Holy See: We consider the UN in itself “very useful for humanity” –
Archbishop Bernardito Auza

Religion as justification for killing

In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, when President Joseph Kabila refused to step down after his second term expired on 19 December 2016, people took to the streets. The demonstrations turned violent.

On New Year's Eve, political leaders reached an agreement – mediated by the Catholic Church, specifically by the National Episcopal Conference of Congo (CENCO) – under which presidential elections would be held by the end of 2017, and President Kabila would relinquish control. If successful, this would be the country's first peaceful transition of power since its independence in 1960.



Conférence épiscopale nationale du Congo (CENCO) leads mediation at the signing on 31 December. Photo: MONUSCO/John Bompengo

"The United Nations has been very appreciative of what the Bishops were able to achieve," Archbishop Auza said, adding that bringing the parties together and mediating avoided "chaos and possible bloodshed in the whole country."

The Holy See is also active in helping to resolve conflicts in Colombia and Venezuela, where Pope Francis was asked to help mediate in difficult political situations, the Archbishop said.

In Burundi, Mozambique and the Philippines, the Church is active mediating conflicts that pit different religious groups against each other: "The Catholic Church is playing a major role in trying to remedy the impression that religion is a cause of all these conflicts, and also to help other religious leaders understand that their role is very important in trying to prevent wars, conflicts or violence."

Within the UN, the Holy See delivers its messages by addressing the Security Council, the General Assembly and at special events.

For example, in 2014, the Security Council adopted resolution 2178, condemning violent extremism and urging measures preventing travel related to and support for the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) and other foreign terrorist fighters. Cardinal Pietro Parolin, the Holy See's Secretary of State, told the Council at the time that in order to counter terrorism, people and countries must achieve social justice for all and mutual cultural understanding.



During a visit in 2008, His Holiness Pope Benedict XVI touches the United Nations flag removed from the ruins of the United Nations Headquarters in Baghdad during the 2001 bombing attack, in remembrance of the injured and those who died. UN Photo/Evan Schneider

"The Holy See – which is a sovereign international subject that also represents a world faith community – affirms that people of faith have a grave responsibility to condemn those who seek to detach faith from reason and 'instrumentalize' faith as a justification for violence," Cardinal Parolin said.

Member States of the General Assembly understand the importance of working with religious leaders on international issues. In 2010, the Assembly designated the first week of February every year as World Interfaith Harmony Week. It aims to spread “the message of interfaith harmony and goodwill in the world’s churches, mosques, synagogues, temples and other places of worship during that week, based on love of God and love of one’s neighbour or on love of the good and love of one’s neighbour, each according to their own religious traditions or conviction.”

According to Assembly resolution A/RES/65/5, Member States recognize that the moral imperatives of all religions, convictions and beliefs call for “peace, tolerance and mutual understanding.”

Committing to nuclear disarmament in good faith

The Holy See has voiced deep concern about the violent use of atomic energy since 1943. Watch Archbishop Auza’s call for nuclear disarmament.

Archbishop Bernardito Auza of the Holy See: Nuclear disarmament is one of the priorities for the year

The tight rope of forced migration

Arguably, no issue has been more polarizing in recent years as the movement of migrants and refugees. Around the world, more than 65 million people are displaced – the greatest number since the Second World War. A record number of migrants and refugees died in the Mediterranean Sea just this winter, the UN Children’s Fund (UNICEF) announced on Friday.

Archbishop Auza expressed great concern about people forced to flee their homes and about how “societies or nations will just close their eyes or borders to them without doing anything.”



In the first official visit of a Vatican representative to United Nations Headquarters, Archbishop Amleto Giovanni Cicognani, signed the UN Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees. The Holy See was the 17th signatory to the convention, which was adopted in July 1951 by a plenipotentiary conference convened at the direction of the General Assembly. Pictured, Archbishop Cicognani (left) with UN Secretary-General Trygve Lie. UN Photo/MB

“The Holy Father explicitly asked me while I was in Rome last month actively to engage in the coming inter-governmental negotiations towards a global compact for safe, orderly and regular migration,” the Archbishop said of the international agreement expected to be adopted in 2018, which will set out a range of common principles and agreements among Member States on international migration.

The compact was launched with the adoption of the New York Declaration for

Refugees and Migrants by a UN summit on 19 September 2016. The next discussions are expected to be held in March in Geneva as part of the UN International Organization for Migration's (IOM) International Dialogue on Migration.

Seasoned in diplomacy, the Holy See is aware of the issues surrounding migration and the challenges some Member States have in aiding refugees and migrants.

"It's sad that we are noticing a rise in a certain type of nationalism – even a certain xenophobia," Archbishop Auza said, adding that migration "is also being used as a tool for some political parties to gain power."



Participants at a special event on ending human trafficking, organized by the Permanent Mission of the Holy See and the Santa Marta Group. Ending human trafficking and all other forms of slavery is a key priority for the Holy See. UN Photo/Loey Felipe

"We understand that migration has negative aspects. As the Holy Father has said, I also appeal to the migrants to respect the cultures and the lives and society of those people who receive them. So it is two-way traffic," he added.

On issues of migration, as with any other issue, the Holy See offers Member States "orientation and spiritual inspiration," as stated on the Holy See Mission's website, as opposed to political support or material aid.

"Simply because we may not agree on a particular issue, we do not disrespect one another," the Archbishop said of working with Member States, the UN Secretariat and its agencies. "We continue to work together. We continue to be friends. We continue to collaborate while respecting and acknowledging the differences."

This story is part of a feature series that examines the roles that world religions have at the United Nations and in international diplomacy.

[Land urgently needed to avert 'drastic deterioration' in Burundian refugee camps in neighbouring countries](#)

7 February 2017 – Stalled peace talks in Burundi are forcing hundreds to flee every day seeking refuge in neighbouring countries, the United Nations refugee agency warned today, appealing for more support, particularly land to shelter

for new arrivals and to ensure protection of children and prevention of sexual and gender-based violence.

According to the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), since April 2015, more than 384,000 Burundian refugees have fled to Tanzania (222,271), Rwanda (84,866), Uganda (about 44,000) and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (32,650) and its projections indicate that numbers will cross half-a-million by the end of the year.

“Without allocation of new land to extend capacity in existing camps or build new ones, these countries will struggle to provide sufficient shelter and life-saving services in the camp sites,” William Spindler, a UNHCR spokesperson, told the media at the regular bi-weekly press briefing in Geneva today.

“Camp facilities also need to be upgraded, including construction of more homes, schools, health centres and better drainage systems to lessen the risk of disease,” he added, noting that host countries have been generous with their support but more action is needed to avert a dangerous slide in standards and conditions.

UNHCR also appealed to donor nations to step up their assistance and funding.

Last year, the UN agency received a \$96.1 million in contributions for the Burundi situation, however, it was 53 per cent of the amount needed.

Relief organizations struggling to meet needs

The pressure is most intense in Tanzania, where average arrivals in January reached almost 600 persons daily.



A girl walks past a pile of firewood in Mahama refugee camp, Eastern Province, Rwanda, which is hosting thousands of refugees from Burundi. Photo: UNICEF/Mike Pflanz

Of the three camps hosting refugees, only Nduta – that recently passed its current capacity of 100,000 persons – is taking new arrivals.

According to Mr. Spindler, humanitarian agencies are struggling to provide minimal basic services and fear outbreaks of health emergencies if the crowding gets worse and facilities fail to keep pace.

Similarly, land shortages are also hitting the Lusenda camp in the Democratic Republic of the Congo where risk of fire is rising as shelters are getting closer due to paucity of land.

In Rwanda's Mahama camp (hosting more than 53,000 against its capacity of 50,000), many are living under plastic sheeting in overcrowded communal hangars, waiting to move to a family shelter. In addition to poor hygiene, living conditions present serious protection risks due to lack of privacy.

Even a 'progressive settlement approach' is struggling to cope

Uganda, which presently hosts 44,000 Burundian refugees in total, according to the UN agency runs a "progressive settlement approach" to refugee management and protection.

The country provides refugees with plots of land to build new homes and grow crops, and live among the Ugandan host communities.

However, Mr. Spindler added that significant investments are needed in local infrastructure to ensure that refugees are able to access key basic services.

Thousands of children out of school as classrooms shelled in eastern Ukraine – UNICEF

7 February 2017 – With thousands of children forced out of school in eastern Ukraine due to last week's surge in fighting, the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and its partners have strongly condemned the indiscriminate shelling of schools, and called for all sides to immediately recommit to the ceasefire signed in Minsk in August 2015.

"The shelling of schools, the one place where children find safety and normalcy during conflict, is unacceptable and has to stop," said UNICEF's Representative in Ukraine, Giovanna Barberis, in a news release. "Children in eastern Ukraine have suffered enough and we must ensure that they have safe spaces to seek solace and support."

At least five schools and two kindergartens have been damaged by heavy shelling and 11 other schools have had to close, according to humanitarian organisations supporting the emergency education response in Ukraine.

More than 2,600 children from 13 schools in government-controlled areas in eastern Ukraine have been affected by the sharp escalation in fighting, along with hundreds more from schools in non-government controlled areas.

"Schools being shelled has tragically become commonplace in this conflict," said Save the Children's Representative in Ukraine, Michele Cecere. "There are reports of large numbers of unexploded ordnance in the streets, putting children at enormous risk when going to school, even when they can reopen. It's vital that children can get safely back to school as soon as possible so they don't miss out on any more learning."

In the town of Avdiivka, seven schools and kindergartens remain shut, with almost 1,400 children out of school. Families in Avdiivka and other villages

in the area are afraid of sending their children to the schools that remain open, due to the heavy fighting and fears of unexploded ordnance in the streets.

The latest closure of schools has worsened the ongoing education crisis already affecting more than 600,000 children in eastern Ukraine. After nearly three years of conflict, more than 740 school – one in five – have been damaged or destroyed, resulting in girls and boys missing many months of schooling due to displacement and the effects of conflict.

UNICEF and Save the Children urged all parties to the conflict to respect international humanitarian law and ensure that schools and other civilian infrastructure are never attacked or in the line of fire.

UN rights expert urges Thailand to loosen restrictions around monarchy defamation law

7 February 2017 – As a student activist awaits trial in detention for posting a news article about the new monarchy on social media, an independent United Nations expert today called on Thai authorities to stop using royal defamation laws to stifle free speech.

At issue is the concept of lèse-majesté – the defaming, insulting or threatening of the royal family – which in Thailand carries a penalty of up to 15 years in prison.

“Lesè-majesté provisions have no place in a democratic country,” said David Kaye, the UN Special Rapporteur on the promotion of freedom of opinion and expression. “The lèse-majesté provision of the Thai Criminal Code is incompatible with international human rights law.”

The expert underlined that public figures, including those exercising the highest political authority, may be subject to criticism.

“The fact that some forms of expression are considered to be insulting to a public figure is not sufficient to justify restrictions or penalties,” he stressed.

The comments were sparked by a case against Jatupat Boonpatararaksa, a student activist, who shared a BBC news article on the new King, Maha Vajiralongkorn Bodindradebayavarangkun, on his private Facebook page.

Mr. Boonpatararaksa is being held in detention after an appeals court revoked his bail on 27 December, reportedly justified by the case's sensitive matter

and on public order and national security grounds. He is expected back before a judge on 10 February.

In 2015, three people were sentenced to decades in prison for criticizing the monarchy on Facebook.

Mr. Kaye has repeatedly urged the Thai Government to allow free speech, including in July of last year when authorities clamped down on public and social media expressions ahead of a constitutional referendum later in the year.

Special Rapporteurs and independent experts are appointed by the Geneva-based UN Human Rights Council to examine and report back on a specific human rights theme or a country situation. The positions are honorary and the experts are not UN staff, nor are they paid for their work.

Syria: UN provides emergency water around Aleppo, as 1.8 million cut off from water supply

6 February 2017 – The United Nations today voiced grave concern about nearly two million Syrians in the area of Aleppo who have been without water for almost a month, as UN agencies are helping to provide emergency access to some of the people in need.

The UN spokesperson today told journalists in New York that an estimated 1.8 million people in Aleppo city and rural eastern Aleppo have been cut off from their main source of water, which is under Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL/Da'esh) control.

"The UN continues to respond to the water crisis by supplying fuel to operate 100 deep wells, and is supporting emergency water trucking, reaching nearly one million people in need of water assistance," the spokesperson said.

The UN is also working closely with its partners, including the International Committee of the Red Cross and the Syrian Arab Red Crescent, to deliver food, nutrition, health and other emergency items to rural Homs.

The inter-agency convoy delivered items to 84,000 people in hard-to-reach Talbiseh yesterday, for the first time since 19 September.

"This convoy is the first cross-line land delivery in February and only the second in 2017," the spokesperson said.

He added that the UN continues to call for "unconditional, unimpeded and

sustained access to all 4.72 million people in hard-to-reach locations across the country," including more than 600,000 in besieged locations.

Also today, the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) confirmed that Stephen O'Brien, the Emergency Relief Coordinator, completed a two-day visit to Jordan. The country is the third-largest host of Syrian refugees in the region.

During his visit, Mr. O'Brien met with senior Jordanian officials, including Prime Minister Hani Mulki and General Mahmoud Frihat, the head of the Jordanian Armed Forces. He also visited the Azraq refugee camp, which is operated by the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR).