Politics of global peace

U.N. summit plans tainted by exclusion of Dalai Lama

If religion is a cause of world violence, can it be a force for world peace, too?

Beginning Aug. 28, an unusual gathering of 1,000 religious leaders hopes to trigger a new global effort for peace, the Millennium World Peace Summit at the United Nations.

Participants at the four-day summit aim to forge conflict resolution strategies in hot-spot regions and propose initiatives on peace, poverty and the environment.

Nevertheless, a symbol of peacemaking to millions, the Dalai Lama of Tibet, has been excluded.

"The summit has to be a call to action," said Bawa Jain, secretary-general of the summit and veteran interfactional organizer.

"Unless religious leaders commit themselves to action in their communities, religion is not going to have any meaning."

Even as the agenda is being finalized, political-religious strains threaten the peace of the peace summit.

Last week, word got out that conference organizers had not invited the Dalai Lama to the first two days of the conference at the United Nations, for fear of offending China.

China would be outraged, a U.N. official warned, if they invited the Tibetan spiritual leader who fled his homeland in 1959 after an abortive uprising against China's occupation.

Instead, organizers invited the Dalai Lama to the last two days of the conference and to give the concluding speech — all scheduled at a New York hotel, away from the United Nations. He declined.

Despite strained relations, organizers say the summit should result in a permanent council of religious leaders to advise the United Nations on preventing and resolving conflicts.

A Hindu teacher with Nashville ties will be among the participants. Sadhguru Jaggi Vasudev, a yoga guru from south India and founder of the Isha Foundation, has taught yoga sessions in Nashville and cultivated a number of local students since 1997. He'll be in Nashville to speak Aug. 21.

His view is that world peace begins with inner peace.

"Never in history has humanity been as comfortable, yet as insecure as it is now," Vasudev said recently.

Many confirmed participants at the summit say that given the number of conflicts with strong religious influences — from Sierra Leone to the Balkans — they won't miss a chance to form alliances there.

Some observers question how much progress religious leaders can make during a brief summit, and just how candid they'll be.

Courageous leaders with large followings "can do great things for peace but making it clear religion cannot be used to legitimize violence," said R. Scott Appleby of the University of Notre Dame.

On the other hand, he said, leaders may be defensive of their constituencies and refuse to admit their own communities' mistakes.

It's common, he says, for leaders to "talk about how their traditions are for peace (and) denounce those who do violence" in the name of religion, but it's rare for them to acknowledge how their own traditions incite violence.

Much has been written about the religious roots of violence, but until recently little attention has been paid to religious resources for peace, said Marc Copin, author of Between Eden and Armageddon: The Future of World Religions, Violence and Peacemaking.

"An understanding of religious tradition," he said, "can generate solutions that speak to billions of people," such as bringing forward-thinking religious leaders into the highest levels of the Mideast peace talks.

Earlier interreligious conferences, such as last year's Parliament of World Religions in Cape Town, South Africa, focused more on interfaction dialogue.

The United Nations is not an official sponsor of the summit, which has received funding from Ted Turner's U.N. Foundation, Better World Fund and others. A coalition of interfactional leaders organized the program.

Still, organizers saw the meeting as a response to a call from U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Annan, who will give the opening address, and the first two days of the summit will be held in the U.N. General Assembly chamber.

Among those who have said they will attend are: Cardinal Francis Arinze of the Vatican's Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue; Cambodian Buddhist leader Samdech Preah Maha Ghosananda; the Grand Mufti of Bosnia, Mustafa Ceric; Israel's Chief Rabbi Meir Lau; the Rev. Jesse Jackson; and numerous indigenous leaders including Chief Oren Lyons, faithkeeper of the Onondaga Nation in upstate New York.

After learning of the Dalai Lama's exclusion, fellow Nobel peace laureate Desmond Tutu fired off a protest letter to Annan.

"I gather this happened through a misunderstanding about pressure from the government of China," Tutu wrote.

"If this is so, then it totally undermines the integrity of the United Nations and the credibility of the summit."

While skeptics predict four days of self-congratulatory speeches, summit secretary-general Jain said he believes the urgency of the problem will inspire more substantive responses.

"The world's great religious leaders," he asserted, "will together exert moral authority in zones of conflict to seek nonviolent solutions."

"The level of violence worldwide," he said, "we have no choice."