

COMMUNIQUÉ

Asia Regional Consultation: 'Affirming the Fullness of Life and Dignity of Children' November 2001, Bangkok

We, the representatives of various churches, ecumenical organisations in Asia that are concerned on issues related to the rights and dignity of children met in Bangkok, Thailand from 9 – 15 November 2001, have heard the cry of millions of children who are being dehumanised in several ways in Asia. As the children of Asia continue to be victimised, we call upon the governments, people and churches in Asia, to work towards the goal of promoting the dignity of children and affirming their fullness of life.

The Consultation on “Affirming the Fullness of Life and Dignity of Children” organised by the World Council of Churches and the Christian Conference of Asia was held amidst a global crisis around the world which is bringing uncertainty and anxiety that ultimately affects millions of children, the *Salinlahi* (future generation).

The participants shared and analysed the situation of children in different Asian countries, especially children who are living in difficult situations. We shared the sentiments of millions of Asian children who are forced to live in vulnerable situations and thereby lose their dignity and identity. Abject poverty and malnutrition, the negative impact of globalisation, sexual abuse, child labour, the trafficking of children, drugs and substance abuse, armed conflict, violence against children, children affected with HIV-AIDS, lack of legal protection mechanisms, etc., confront Asia's children today.

The negative impact of globalisation, especially the process of economic globalisation, the liberalisation of the market, and the trade and investment policies of different Asian governments add to the present miseries of Asian children. The Asian economic crisis that erupted in 1997 still affects children in Asia in many ways. As the Asian countries continue to face economic turmoil and are plunged into increasing foreign debts, the Asian children also continue to suffer more from the withdrawal of food, health and educational subsidies.

Poverty and ignorance are considered the most important factors driving children in Asia like in many other regions to be sexually exploited and trafficked. The number of children who are spending their childhood on the streets is increasing in countries such as Indonesia, Thailand, Cambodia, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, India, Pakistan, Mongolia and the Philippines. The sale and trafficking of children for sexual exploitation, pornography, forced labour, have become serious concerns in several Asian countries. We note with a sense of disappointment that Asia has become a safe haven for thousands of paedophiles from developed countries. Impoverished children who live in vulnerable situations in countries like Thailand, Cambodia, Sri Lanka, India, Nepal, Vietnam, the Philippines and Indonesia continue to face these inhuman activities.

Ethnic, religious and communal conflicts and civil wars going on in countries such as Afghanistan, Sri Lanka, Cambodia, Nepal, India, the Philippines, Indonesia,

and Myanmar have affected the future of millions of children. With grave concern, we note that the bombing in Afghanistan continues to kill and maim thousands of innocent children; more than half of the population of children in Sri Lanka have become victims of the on-going civil war. The conflict in Mindanao in the Philippines, and the increasing militarisation in Indonesia, Nepal and the Philippines, have displaced and traumatised thousands of children; the use of children in war has been increasing in Afghanistan, Sri Lanka, Myanmar and in the Philippines.

Although all Asian governments have ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, they continue to join the bandwagon of the globalisation process, thus depriving the rights of the future generation. The churches in Asia also have been silent when it comes to the point of addressing the issues of children today and it has maintained only its approach of charity in addressing the problems of children. Considering these realities, we emphasise the need for churches to transform their traditional charity approach in order to be engaged in a relevant mission to respond to the cries of millions of Asian children.

We have heard of all these problems that children in Asia are faced with. The day to day life situation of these children destroys their dignity and fullness of life. As we are increasingly aware of these problems of the *Salinlahi* in Asia, we also commit ourselves to work for the promotion of the dignity of children everywhere.

While we listen to the question raised by Isaac, *“Where is the lamb for burnt for offering?”* (Genesis 22: 7b) and also to the voice heard in Rama *“mourning and great weeping of Rachel for her children are no more, (Jeremiah 31:15)* we are reminded of our responsibilities and commitment to affirm the fullness of life and dignity of children and *“hoping for a better future”*, declares the Lord.

We call on Churches and National Councils, the Christian Conference of Asia (CCA) and the World Council of Churches (WCC) to deepen the concern for children, so that the Asian churches and ecclesiastical bodies can work together to protect and promote the dignity of children in a more effective way.

We urge the WCC and the CCA to take leadership in forming a network of all concerned Christian organisations and people who are working on issues affecting children and to provide a platform to initiate sustainable programmes in this region to address the problems of children.