38th annual IofC International forum in Japan

IofC Japan hosted the 38th annual IofC International forum with the theme, ‘Have a good look at yourself, Japan and the World and make sure you count!’ It was inaugurated by Mr. Hironori Yano, the chairman of the IofC Association of Japan with his welcoming speech. The forum was attended by 85 people including guests and international friends of IofC: Mr Niketu Iralu (Social and Peace Activist from Nagaland, Northeast of India), Dr Imad Karam (film maker and Executive Director of IofC International), Mr Miftahul Huda (Indonesia- Representative of the Asia Pacific Coordinating Group - (APCG IofC), Mr Ren-Jou Liu and Mrs Grace Liu with their daughter Ms Hsiao Yun Liu (Taiwan, Chinese in Action) and Mr Pete Nagi (Nagaland, Northeast India).

The forum was held 5-6 November 2016, in Tokyo at the International House of Japan. It was led by Mrs Hisako Okuma (Board Member of the IofC Association of Japan and representative of APCG-IofC) as the chairperson of the forum. In her speech, Hisako shared that this forum would give people the space to look at the issues which arise from the different backgrounds people have and which help to create diversity in Japan as well as in the rest of the world. We would be able to exchange our thoughts, and look at our own lives, as we sought our role in our family and in society so that we could play a part in building a sustainable society. Each one of us would be able to take the first step in our own life, listening to our inner voice and looking at what we have learned together in the forum. Hisako thanked everyone who participated in the forum. Her welcome ended with the singing of, ‘It’s better to light one candle than to curse the darkness.’

The Keynote address was given by Mr Niketu Iralu who spoke on the topic, ‘Perils and Opportunities of Diversity - Ethnic Nationalities and Tribes of Northeast India and Myanmar’. Nagaland, Mr Iralu said, was situated where the Brown and the Yellow races meet, and the history of his people has been created by conflict occurring at this meeting point. He expressed his concerns on the identity of the Rohingya people of Myanmar and also mentioned the recent talks between Aung San Suu Kyi and the Japanese Ministers in Tokyo on the issue of the Rohingya people. He said that these talks showed the extremely difficult and sensitive challenge of diversity in Myanmar today. The same challenge was confronting the tribes and ethnic minorities across Myanmar and the Northeast of India, and the consequences of their success or failure would affect the whole of Southeast Asia, India and China.

He narrowed the discussion of this broad subject down to the situation his own people are facing today. Mr Iralu told how his village decided to go far and deep enough to heal the wounds that the villagers had inflicted on one another. The resentment and desire for revenge, bred by unhealed wounds, had paralyzed them, making it impossible for the village to develop and to protect the priceless ecosystem or the virgin forests it shared with neighbouring villages. The toughest part of the task was how to deal with the 22 political killings that had taken place in the village in the last few years, or the intense conflict of the Naga struggle for self-determination.

The pressures, created by the struggle, led to the villages eliminating one another to settle old scores or for immediate solutions which were to their own advantage. A Commission of 21 people, (with Mr Iralu as the senior member), representing the clans, worked for over a decade to get the villagers to find a common understanding of what had happened and the price of change
demanded of all of them if the coming generations were to find a better future. The Commission succeeded in sensitively enabling the descendants of those who had done the killings, and those who had been wronged, to achieve ‘forgiving and being forgiven’. The members were able to help their fellow villagers because they themselves had faced where they too had been a part of what had gone wrong.

Mr Iralu maintained that the issues of ethnic nationality and tribes spread all over South East Asia and that he could cover only a small part of this subject. He mentioned the various conflicts in the second half of the last century that had shocked the world. They were supposedly local issues but the world has not been able to forget the massacres caused by the conflicts. He mentioned Cambodia, Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi, Liberia, Sierra Leone, the Middle East, Sri Lanka and South Sudan, where the massacres are continuing. He expressed his deep concern that the conflicts in his own region could erupt, go out of control and destroy his people. He spoke about what he had personally tried to do to help the situation in his home state of Nagaland. He shared his personal experience on listening to his inner voice and how it guided him to start the change needed in his own life if he was to help his people and the world. He said his attempt to do something had been guided by the truth that, ‘Hurts not transformed are always transferred’.

Mr Iralu mentioned that some young people in Nagaland, whose lives had started to change, are giving hope to people. He said, ‘If individuals take responsibility for their own wrongs, put things right and accept to work together in their situations, there is a chance to prevent violence going out of control because elements of mutual trust established among a few people become a bridge across the divides.’

In conclusion, Mr Iralu quoted the Dalai Lama who stated that the 20th century was one of the most violent centuries in humankind history and that people should make sure that the 21st century should be a century of dialogue and talk. Mr Iralu was of the opinion that this forum would be a conference of dialogues and talks in the years to come.

Mr Seiko Luis Ishikawa, the Ambassador of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela to Japan, spoke on, ‘Music as a tool to transform society in Venezuela’. He was of the opinion that music could play a big part in changing the world. He is a second generation Japanese whose parents moved to Venezuela in the 1950s. He said that the Venezuelans were warm and loving people who live in harmony with people from different places and races. He spoke about ‘El Sistema’, the famous Venezuelan music education programme which was founded by Jose Antonio Abreu in 1975.

He also spoke about Gustavo Dudamel, a world renowned conductor from Venezuela, who benefitted from the ‘El Sistema’ programme. In this programme children are given free education along with the opportunity to learn music. Children start learning music at a young age and are taught the values of respect - to respect others and oneself, and this allows them to be loved by others. This system of learning through music has spread to several countries all over the world and in 2015 the National Youth Orchestra of Venezuela visited Tokyo.

He quoted Mother Teresa and said that the biggest problem of poverty was not the lack of food and clothes, but a bigger reason is that we don’t count the poor people in society. He concluded
by saying that Japan does not have a word for ‘inclusion’ and that it was imperative for us to include the underprivileged people in our society.

In the afternoon session the workshop on, ‘What is our role to respond to the issue of Refugees?’ was led by Ms Azusa Maeda, a student at Waseda University. We were asked to explore if we were the one who had lost everything that was important in life, how would we face it in order to start all over again.

The final speech on the opening day was given by Dr Imad Karam. His topic was, ‘On the crucial importance of accepting diversity as from the issue of refugees’. Dr Karam was born in Gaza City, Palestine and now lives in the UK. He has made award-winning films and had won a scholarship to do postgraduate studies in media and communications in London, where he also obtained his PhD on the impact of the media on Arab youth identity. He spoke about what happened in Gaza, exposed to Israeli military occupation and the issue of identity for Arabs, Muslims and Palestinians living in the UK.

In 2002 he was introduced to IofC and Quiet Times in Caux, Switzerland, where he met an Israeli lady during the ‘Agenda for Reconciliation’. Since then, Dr Karam has been involved in IofC work, especially under the mentorship of David Channer, in making the films ‘The Imam and the Pastor’, ‘Beyond Forgiveness’ and an upcoming film on the Legacy of Frank Buchman. Dr Karam was inspired by the idea of IofC as well as by Frank Buchman that ordinary people can make a change, and reflected the vision for the country and the world that we should look at the root causes of human nature - fear, greed, hate, injustice, ignorance, and to change them to love, care, compassion for human beings and nature. In his final message he challenged us to think and take action as we all have a role and responsibility to play to make a change in this world from the personal to the global.

On the second day the topic was, ‘Make sure you count’. The forum started with a morning reflection along with the ‘Telephone Song’ sung by Niketu Iralu. The song’s message is that there is always a calling from God to be listened to if we want to see change.

We were also very touched and challenged by video messages we received from Australia by James Cordiner, from USA by Rob Corcoran, from Africa by Amina Dikedi and also by Jens Wilhelmsen from Norway.

This was followed by Mr Ren-Jou Liu’s speech on ‘Chinese in Action’, which he initiated, obeying the thoughts he had in his quiet time. He wants to see the Chinese people free from the hatred and bitterness in their hearts so that China will have a real strength to serve others in the world community.

Mr Liu said, ‘In the past most of the time we Chinese were arrogant and looked down on our neighbouring countries. Because of our arrogance and selfishness we suffer.’ He convinced himself that he would dedicate his life serving the people of China. Chinese in Action aims to train a group of young Chinese who are committed to the future of their country, who have experienced change in their lives, and who are willing to give the best of themselves to fight for an unselfish China by reaching out to the world with a serving heart. The programme lasts seven
months and during the last three Chinese in Action has involved 10,002 people in different cities in China, Malaysia and Taiwan. The workshops of ‘Life sensitivity training and deep healing’ and ‘One on One Caring’ have touched many hearts and souls.

A panel discussion was held after the lunch break and the theme was ‘Make sure you count!’ The coordinator was Mr Seong Hocheol from Japan and the four panellists were Dr Kwang-Sun Cha from South Korea, Mrs Grace Liu from Taiwan, Mr Miftahul Huda from Indonesia and Ms Azusa Maeda from Japan.

Dr Kwang-Sun Cha was the first to speak; he narrated his first visit to Japan and spoke of his journey, his total commitment and dedication in championing the values and principles of MRA in South Korea. He wanted people to focus not on ‘Who is right’ but on ‘What is right’.

Mrs Grace Liu shared the difficult family problems that she encountered during her school days and how one of her friends introduced her to IofC. She talked about her experiment with honesty and shared her experience. Grace narrated how difficult life became for her after the sudden demise of her mother. She went through a very difficult phase. However, through the help of quiet time and other self realisation processes, she was able to overcome her difficulties. Mrs Grace Liu hoped that together we can build a better world and throughout her life she has walked and worked towards this goal.

The youngest panellist, Ms Azusa Maeda, got acquainted with IofC two years ago. She shared the problem she had with her mother and how she was able to overcome it. Speaking about her experience in India, Ms Maeda said she realized that she had something in her that she could contribute back to society. She concluded by discussing how Japan and Korea are geographical neighbours and that they should learn how to live in harmony.

Mr Miftahul Huda, a young man from Indonesia, shared about the Asia Pacific Youth Conference (APYC) which was held last year in Indonesia. He also spoke about his home state and country. He discussed his childhood and found out that he had been unhappy and felt abandoned by his parents, especially his father. Later on he was introduced to IofC and he slowly learned to forgive the past and learned to move on in his life. He shared that his calling was to bridge the gap between the Muslim and the non-Muslim community. He is presently working in trust building where he brings young Muslims and Christians together in a common platform.

There was a quick Q&A session between the panellists, the coordinator and the people attending the conference.

Ms Azusa Maeda, a student at Waseda University said, ‘I really feel thankful about being able to have had the opportunity to express my ideas and feelings in front of all the participants during the panel discussion. I feel that it could be so powerful to voice my ideas and have people know that I have such ideas and motivation, because there could be somebody who could help me with some ideas; at least I don’t keep it to myself and let anything happen.’
During the forum there was space for small group discussions, to share about ourselves and also discuss the topic from the panel discussion and a space to build trust and have dialogue among the participants.

The forum was closed by singing, ‘Be the Change’, and also some reflection and insights from the participants. Pete Nagi, who had accompanied Mr Niketu Iralu from Nagaland-Northeast India, shared that he had had a wonderful experience in Japan. He said the resilience and hard working nature of the Japanese people overwhelmed him, and by sharing his experiences gained in this conference, he hoped that he and his state will be able to contribute something back to society and the world.

There is no doubt that this 38th International IofC Forum in Japan alerted many of the participants to take their own first step to face the reality of what is happening in Japan and the world, and to make us take our own first step in life to bring a change that we want to see in our society and the world. Mr Akihiro Tanaka, the Vice Chairman of IofC Association of Japan, closed the Forum wishing everyone a new path ahead with new decisions taken during the Forum.

Pete Nagi and Miftahul Huda