

### Further Reading

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- See also: Bahá'í Faith and the United Nations; Brown, Vinson; Earth Charter; Men of the Trees (East Africa); United Nations' "Earth Summits"; World Wildlife Fund.

## Bahá'í Faith and the United Nations

The Bahá'í Faith has a long-standing relationship with the United Nations, including support of international efforts for the protection of the environment. Since the Bahá'í teachings for world unity and peace, based on the writings of Bahá'u'lláh (1817–1892), include principles of collective security to be implemented by a federated world government with executive, legislative and judicial branches, Bahá'ís have long supported efforts to establish international organizations. 'Abdu'l-Bahá (1844–1921), the son of Bahá'u'lláh and leader of the Bahá'í Faith after his passing, wrote an encouraging letter on Universal Peace to the Central Organization for a Durable Peace in The Hague in 1919. An International Bahá'í Bureau was established in Geneva in 1925. A petition concerning the seizure of Bahá'í property in Iraq was taken to the Permanent Mandates Commission of the League of Nations in 1929 and its decision in favor of the Bahá'ís was adopted by the Council of the League of Nations.

Bahá'ís were present at the founding of the United Nations in San Francisco in 1945, an event that confirmed a prediction in 1912 by 'Abdu'l-Bahá that the first flag of universal peace would be raised in that state. Individual Bahá'ís and Bahá'í communities around the world have

been active supporters of events such as United Nations Day and Human Rights Day, often collaborating with local UN offices and other organizations.

The formal relationship of the Bahá'í International Community (BIC) and the United Nations began with its accreditation to the UN Office of Public Information in 1948, after a national Bahá'í organization was accredited the previous year. Consultative Status to the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) was granted in 1970, and accreditation to UNICEF in 1976. The Bahá'í International Community maintains offices in New York and Geneva to oversee its relations with international organizations. An affiliation with the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) began in 1974, with the BIC participating regularly as an observer in UNEP Governing Council sessions starting with the first session in 1973. Formal representation with the United Nations Centre for Human Settlements was established in 1985.

As the United Nations increased its involvement with non-governmental organizations, Bahá'í activities at the UN have grown accordingly. The BIC has been active in, and on occasions has chaired, the Committee of Non-governmental Organizations (CONGO) in New York. With the frequent persecutions to which Bahá'ís have been subjected in Iran and other countries, the Bahá'ís have been particularly interested in the work of the UN to protect human rights, and active with the Commission on Human Rights, which has passed numerous recommendations concerning the rights of Bahá'ís to practice their religion.

The environment has been another area of interest at the UN. The Bahá'í teachings contain many references to nature as a reflection of divine attributes, and to ecological principles of interconnectedness and reciprocity. Preservation of the ecological balance of the Earth is a major priority for global cooperation. Bahá'í International Community delegations therefore participated actively in the UN Conference on the Human Environment (Stockholm, 1972) and its NGO Environment Forum, as well as the World Population Conference (Bucharest, 1974), the World Food Conference (Rome, 1974), and the Conference on Human Settlements (Vancouver, 1976). Active involvement with the UN in the economic and social areas has continued across a wide variety of issues from narcotic drugs and crime prevention through youth and women to the law of the sea, and numerous statements and reports have been presented to the UN as contributions to its consultative processes. With the major round of UN conferences in the 1990s, Bahá'í participation grew accordingly, and the BIC established an Office of the Environment for this purpose. Both the Bahá'í International Community and various national communities were active in the preparatory process and at the UN Conference on Environment and Development (Rio de Janeiro, 1992), with the BIC as one of 13 NGOs selected to present a statement at the

Earth Summit itself. A large delegation also participated in the World Social Summit (Copenhagen, 1995). At the World Summit on Sustainable Development (Johannesburg, 2002), the BIC again sent an active delegation and distributed a statement. In addition, two Bahá'í-inspired organizations, the International Environment Forum and the European Bahá'í Business Forum were also accredited to the Summit and organized various parallel activities. The International Environment Forum, a professional organization founded in 1996 with members in over 40 countries, organized seminars on Indicators of Sustainability (as part of the Science and Technology Forum), Education and Values for Sustainable Development, Integrating Science in Local Communities, and Multiple Dimensions of Globalization.

The Bahá'í International Community has issued many statements for UN conferences and on other occasions giving the Bahá'í perspective on topics relevant to the UN. These are widely appreciated for the substantive contributions they make to international debate. Some of the most significant concerning the environment and sustainable development are "A Bahá'í Perspective on Nature and the Environment" (1986), "The Bahá'í Statement on Nature" (1987), "Environment and Development" (1990), "The Prosperity of Humankind" (1995), "Valuing Spirituality in Development" (1998), "Sustainable Development: The Spiritual Dimension" (2001) and "Religion and the United Nations: Convergence or Divergence?" (2002). Two have been specifically concerned with needed reforms in the United Nations itself ("Proposals for Charter Revision," 1955, and "Turning Point for All Nations," 1995). The international governing body of the Bahá'í Faith also issued a declaration to the peoples of the world on "The Promise of World Peace" in 1985.

The Bahá'ís have long tried to demonstrate the positive contribution that religion can make to the work of the United Nations. They participated in the Summit of Spiritual Leaders at the UN held as part of the Millennium Summit in 2000. The Bahá'í statement to the World Summit on Sustainable Development (2002) specifically calls on the UN to stop ignoring the religions in its work, both because of the positive contribution they can make to sustainable development, and because religious fanaticism is a major threat to world peace. It proposes that the UN create a formal consultative structure similar to that for indigenous peoples, to which all religions that renounce fanaticism would be invited.

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#### Further Reading

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See also: Bahá'í Faith; United Nations' "Earth Summits".

### Bahuguna, Sunderlal (1927–)

Sunderlal Bahuguna is one of the best-known leaders of the Chipko Movement of Northern India, a peasant movement for the protection of local forest resources from outside contractors. For his articulation of environmental values he is recognized as India's first guru of environmental consciousness. In recent years he has been associated with the protest against the construction of the Tehri Dam, in the Indian State of Uttar Pradesh.

In early 1973, in the Chamoli district of Uttar Pradesh, an organization concerned with local employment made a request to the state forest department for an allotment of ash trees for the production of agricultural implements. The forest department denied their request but permitted an outside contractor to fell a nearby forest to produce sporting goods for the export market. The local people resolved to hug the trees in order to stand in the way of the axe intended to cut them down. Here, the movement known as Chipko (meaning "to hug") was born. Sunderlal Bahuguna underlined the moral foundation of this movement with foot marches, fasts, and discourses on the religious significance of the forests. He argues that his ecological vision of a harmonious relationship with nature is rooted in the soil of Indian religion, in which mountains, rivers and trees are the objects of worship. In 1981, accompanied by a small group of followers, Bahuguna undertook a *padyathra* (or foot march) of 4870 kilometers through the foothills of the Himalayas. Reminding the people of an understanding of nature embedded in their religious heritage, he shared the Chipko story at every stop and raised awareness of the exploitation to which their forests and their own lives were being exposed.