

International Conference on Religious Tourism

“Fostering sustainable socio-economic development in host communities”

15 June 2015 - Bethlehem, State of Palestine

**Taleb Rifai, Secretary-General, World Tourism Organization
(UNWTO)**

To be checked against delivery

H.E. Dr. Rami Al-Hamdallah, Prime Minister of State of Palestine

**H.E. Mrs. Rula Ma’ayah, Minister of Tourism and Antiquities of the
State of Palestine**

The Right Honorable Mr. Tony Blair, Quartet Representative

**H.E. Mr. Yasuhide Nakayama, State Minister for Foreign Affairs of
Japan**

Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen,

On the behalf of the World Tourism Organization, the United Nations specialized agency for tourism, it is a great pleasure to welcome you all to the International Conference on Religious Tourism in Bethlehem.

On today’s special occasion, I would like to extend my deepest gratitude to the government of the State of Palestine, in particular the Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities for the partnership with UNWTO in organising this Conference.

Your Excellency, Dr. Al-Hamdallah, we are truly grateful for your presence, it is without a doubt a clear testament to your strong support for tourism and the contribution that the sector can make to improve the livelihoods of local communities.

Dear Mr. Tony Blair, thank you for your presence with us here today and for your support in making tourism one of the drivers of a better live for all.

Allow me to also take this opportunity to commend your steadfast commitment over the past eight years as Quartet Representative. Your service has made a lasting difference in people's lives and I trust that it will continue to be the strong foundations for the region's genuine social and economic transformation.

Mr. Yasuhide Nakayama, thank you so much for your presence and for your country's support to this Conference.

Japan being the biggest donor in terms of Official Development Assistance in tourism it is no surprise that you would be at the forefront of supporting this Conference and its objectives of transforming religious tourism into a tool for local development.

Allow me to commend Japan for your leadership role in development assistance in tourism and hope that your example may be followed by many other developed nations.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Today we gather here bonded by our shared vision of tourism as a true agent of inclusive development, and what better place to do so than the Holy City of Bethlehem – a UNESCO Heritage site since 2012 and host to millions of pilgrims every year.

We also meet at a time when international tourism continues to grow from strength to strength.

In 2014, tourism grew in all world regions to achieve new historic records.

International tourist arrivals grew 4.4% to reach 1,135 million, contributing a total of US\$1.5 trillion in tourism earnings - or an average of US\$ 4 billion per day.

This marks the fifth consecutive year of above average growth for our sector since 2010 and UNWTO foresees this growth to continue over the coming years to reach a staggering 1.8 billion.

Against these encouraging numbers, we are pleased to see that international tourism in the Middle East showed signs of rebounding in 2014, after three straight years of decline.

Most destinations in the region posted good results, driving the region's 5% growth to bring up total number of international tourists to 50 million.

This growth was complemented by the 6% increase in international tourism receipts that reached US\$ 49 billion.

Looking ahead, UNWTO's prospects for the Middle East region remain positive. For 2015, we expect arrivals to increase by +2% to +5%.

Our long-term forecasts show that the Middle East will continue to be one of the fastest growing tourism regions in the coming decades, and by 2030 we expect the region to triple its present volume of arrivals to welcome 149 million tourists.

Yet, it is clear that tourism remains very much an untapped resource around the world. Here in Palestine for example, a report recently released shows that tourism could raise Palestine's average per capita income by approximately 36% in the coming decade.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

We are truly living in the Age of Travel, with more than one billion people now journeying to an international destination each year, plus an estimated six billion travelling within their own borders.

Never before have so many people visited so many places and immersed in such a diverse range of cultures, traditions and faiths.

Among the many motivations for travelling, visiting religious sites and cultural heritage ranks high on traveler's wish lists.

Indeed, travel motivated by religious beliefs has long predated modern tourism. The devotees of the world's great religions have long embraced pilgrimage as an integral part of their spiritual discipline.

Today, a growing number of travellers are interested in learning about the places they visit more deeply, by experiencing their culture, history and their religious heritage.

UNWTO estimates that about 300 to 330 million tourists visit the world's key religious sites every year, with approximately six hundred million national and international religious voyages in the world.

These spiritual journeys, while motivated by a range of personal reasons, have significant impacts on a much broader scope.

Allow me to take a moment to share with you why religious tourism can be one of the most effective tools to foster inclusive and sustainable development.

1. Religious tourism raises awareness on humanity's common heritage and provides resources for preservation.

Often, the awareness of our prized heritage is the first step towards its preservation.

Religious heritage sites have an immeasurable value, both inherent and as a source of public education, identity and pride.

Furthermore, tourism is often one of the key sources of income for cultural preservation.

2. Religious tourism can contribute to local development.

As key tourism destinations, religious sites provide tremendous opportunities for local communities, by creating jobs and viable sources of livelihood, leading to their socio- economic development and empowerment.

Going beyond economic benefits, tourism has the ability to help communities value their unique cultures and traditions, which builds their self-esteem and sense of place in the world.

Yet, for tourism to be an effective tool to empower local communities, it is key to ensure their engagement and full integration into the tourism value chain.

I am very pleased to see that this is one of the key points of our discussions during this Conference.

3. Religious tourism builds cultural understanding.

The development of religious tourism destinations has allowed pilgrimages to regain their past prominence, making it possible for pilgrimage routes to connect peoples and nations, and religious gatherings to attract millions of people.

Religious heritage sites are important meeting grounds for both visitors and host communities. This encounter between visitors and

hosts is the fundamental experience of tourism, creating a connecting thread that fosters respect and mutual understanding between different cultures, the values needed for cultural pluralism and inter-faith dialogue.

Tourism needs peace and understanding to flourish but tourism itself can be an agent of peace - it is a transformative force that breaks down cultural barriers and builds bridges between people, between communities and nations – the very foundations of cultural understanding and peace.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

While we welcome the vigorous expansion of religious travel over recent decades, we are left with several crucial challenges; challenges which I would also like to highlight to enliven the discussions of today's Conference.

These challenges include:

1. The preservation of religious sites and monuments.

Tourism must dignify, not diminish our religious heritage.

To realize this, we need for careful and efficient managed tourism development, proper education among tourists and host

communities, and the close coordination between conservation and tourism managers in order to protect religious sites and monuments.

Tourism policies and activities must be conducted with respect for artistic, archaeological and cultural heritage. Financial resources from visits to religious sites and monuments should be used for their upkeep, congestion management and enhancement.

2. **Upholding respect for local traditions and religious practices**

UNWTO advocates for ever more vigilance to ensure that the cultural rights and heritage of communities are safeguarded, especially their intangible legacy.

We strongly promote responsible attitudes, greater awareness, and conscientious conduct among travellers to prevent the deliberate or unintentional violation of the values and traditions of host communities.

This is particularly important in religious sites. We need to ensure that the "spirit of place" that bestows sites with religious significance and sacred value is fully respected while providing resources for tourism;

3. **The inclusive development of local communities.**

There can be no real tourism development if its numerous social and economic benefits do not trickle down fairly to the host communities.

It is fundamental to integrate local communities in the tourism value chain as a means to create job opportunities for small and medium enterprises, foster education and skills building, and ensure local governance capacities.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Addressing these critical challenges cannot be done in isolation – we need closer collaboration in order to face our most pressing issues and leverage existing opportunities.

In this respect, I trust that the outcomes of this Conference will provide us with important recommendations on how to protect and preserve religious sites, respect the social, cultural and ethical values of host communities and promote their full inclusion in the tourism value chain.

Our close and unified action is needed to achieve our aims in transforming religious tourism into a genuine instrument of opportunity and socioeconomic development.

In closing, I wish to express my gratitude once again to the Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities of Palestine, and to all our speakers and

participants who have joined us for this Conference from around the world showing the universal character of this topic.

I look forward to our engaging and inspiring discussions, which will be a positive step in advancing religious tourism to fulfill its immense potential to uplift and empower local communities across the world.

Indeed, we are a diverse expression of cultures, faiths and beliefs, and yet when we come together, we can speak with one voice and act as one united force for the common good.

Thank you very much.