

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

African Leaders at Utah State Capitol Call for Faith–Government Partnerships to Secure a Young Continent’s Future

Salt Lake City, October 16, 2026 — Senior officials from the African Union Commission, the Organization of Islamic Cooperation and the Community of Sahel-Saharan States, joined by government leaders from Djibouti and Senegal and South African religious freedom advocate Michael Swain, called on Friday for deeper partnerships between governments and religious communities to secure the future of the world’s youngest continent. They spoke at a special G20 Interfaith Forum (IF20) session at the Utah State Capitol, co-sponsored by the Sutherland Institute and the Stirling Foundation.

Ambassador Abderrahim Kadmiri, Acting Executive Secretary of the Community of Sahel-Saharan States (CEN-SAD), said religion is too often instrumentalized by armed groups in the Sahel, even as religious communities remain among the region’s most trusted actors, present in places governments cannot reach. Security responses are necessary but not sufficient, he said, calling for faith actors to be connected to early-warning and mediation systems, for religious educators to be trained to stay credible online, and for stronger protection of freedom of religion or belief. By 2050, he noted, one in four people on earth will be African, and most will be young.

“Trust takes years to build and moments to lose,” Kadmiri said. “The question before all of us is whether we will build partnerships that will outlast the crises before us, for the young people of the Sahel and of the world.”

Michael Swain, Executive Director of Freedom of Religion South Africa (FOR SA), warned that freedom of religion or belief across Africa faces both violence, including within faith traditions, and a creeping trend toward state control of religion. He pointed to Rwanda, where he said nearly 10,000 churches have been closed and pastors must hold a three-year approved degree, and to Mozambique, which he said requires 5,000 members for a religious group to register. He also cautioned against laws and policies imported from outside Africa that run contrary to local cultures and beliefs, and urged that religious freedom be made African, rooted in the spirit of ubuntu.

“You do not check in your belief system when you go out in the morning. It informs everything,” Swain said. “And unfortunately, it is one of those rights that is being slowly but surely chipped away.”

Dr. Djim Ousmane Dramé, Director of Religious Affairs and Integration of Arabic-Language Graduates in the Presidency of the Republic of Senegal, presented Senegal’s model of coexistence: a country that is more than 95 percent Muslim and was led by a Christian president for its first two decades of independence. He described the Saly Declaration on Religious Discourse, adopted in October 2025 by Muslim, Christian and traditional religious leaders under the auspices of the Presidency, which commits to a National Observatory for Religious Discourse and a permanent framework for dialogue. He proposed a Grand Prize for Peaceful Coexistence and “Peaceful Coexistence Clubs” in schools.

Senegal possesses mineral and economic wealth, Dramé said, but “we also have another resource that is no less important: our spiritual resources.”

Ambassador Hameed Opeloyeru, Permanent Observer of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation to the United Nations, said governments often assume peace lies exclusively in their domain, but faith leaders bring the trust that mediation requires. He described OIC efforts to direct zakat, or almsgiving, toward production rather than consumption so that the poor can escape long-term dependency, and pointed to the Welfare Square and Humanitarian Center of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, which delegates visited earlier in the week, as an example of faith acting as a global force for good. He urged that the Forum’s recommendations call on governments to recognize and facilitate the role of religious organizations in peacebuilding.

“Religious leaders also play a critical role in resolving conflicts in a transformational manner,” Opeloyeru said.

Hazel Dixon, Regional Desk Officer for NGO, Social and Economic Issues at the African Union Commission, described the work of the AU’s Citizens and Diaspora Directorate, including the AU Interfaith Dialogue Forum and an interfaith initiative that engages young people in preventing violent extremism.

“Africa’s religious and cultural diversity is an important asset for continental peace and solidarity,” Dixon said.

H.E. Omar Ahmed Wais, Second Vice President of the National Assembly of the Republic of Djibouti, speaking in French, described Djibouti as a small country at the crossroads of Africa and the Middle East with a strong tradition of dialogue and peaceful coexistence.

“Our experience tells us that dialogue is not a weakness; dialogue is a strength. Respect is not a weakness; respect is a strength,” Wais said.

Katrina Lantos Swett, President of the Lantos Foundation for Human Rights and Justice and former Chair of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, moderated, framing religious freedom as the foundation on which other rights and social goods depend. Get religious freedom right, she said, and a whole host of other benefits follow.

The session, “African Perspectives,” took place October 16, 2026, from 3:30 to 5:00 p.m. MDT in the Board Room of the Utah State Capitol, following a session on Middle Eastern and Eurasian perspectives, as part of the invitation-only Capitol program “Religious Organizations and Furtherance of the Common Good.” The Forum concludes October 17 ahead of the G20 Leaders’ Summit in Miami on December 14–15. The full program is available at g20interfaith.org/2026-forum-program.

Speakers included:

- **Katrina Lantos Swett (Moderator)** — President, Lantos Foundation for Human Rights and Justice

- **H.E. Omar Ahmed Wais** — Second Vice President, National Assembly of the Republic of Djibouti
- **H.E. Ambassador Abderrahim Kadmiri** — Acting Executive Secretary, Community of Sahel-Saharan States (CEN-SAD)
- **H.E. Ambassador Hameed Opeloyeru** — Permanent Observer of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation to the United Nations
- **Dr. Djim Ousmane Dramé** — Director of Religious Affairs and Integration of Arabic-Language Graduates, Presidency of the Republic of Senegal
- **Hazel Dixon** — Regional Desk Officer for NGO, Social and Economic Issues, African Union Commission
- **Michael Swain** — Executive Director, Freedom of Religion South Africa (FOR SA)

Full speaker bios are available in the [2026 Forum Directory](#).

About the G20 Process

The Group of Twenty, or G20, is the premier forum for international economic cooperation, bringing together the leaders of Earth’s most prosperous economies. Collectively, G20 members represent around 80 percent of the world’s economic output, two-thirds of the global population and three-quarters of international trade. Throughout the year, representatives from G20 countries gather to discuss financial and socioeconomic issues as well as broader humanitarian issues targeted by the UN’s Sustainable Development Goals.

About the G20 Interfaith Forum

The G20 Interfaith Forum seeks global solutions by collaborating with religious thought leaders and political representatives to help shape the overall G20 agenda. It draws on the vital roles that religious institutions and beliefs play in world affairs, reflecting a rich diversity of institutions, ideas, and values. Through its extensive network of networks, it helps prioritize key global policy goals and point toward practical means of implementation at every level of society.

For more information, please visit www.g20interfaith.org.

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