

**Address by Ambassador Munir Akram, President of ECOSOC, Conference on Interfaith Cooperation for Peace New York, 22 June 2005**

**Mr. Chairman, H.E Dr. Alberto G. Romulo,**

**Mr. President of the General Assembly,**

**Excellencies,**

**Distinguished Delegates,**

**Ladies and Gentlemen,**

As the President of the Economic and Social Council, it gives me great pleasure to address this Conference on Interfaith Cooperation for Peace, convened by an unprecedented tripartite core group, which includes Member States, UN System Organizations and civil society. This conference provides an important opportunity to address the crucial issue of enhancing interfaith dialogue and cooperation to promote sustainable peace, in a comprehensive and fruitful way. Today we can take stock where we stand and address the outstanding challenges in regard to the promotion of peace.

- 1) Faith is a source of mutual strength, promotes indivisible morality, framework of values for human action and endeavours.
- 2) Faith is also a powerful instrument for social – and political mobilization – to achieve collective goals.
- 3) History has bequeathed humanity with many diverse faiths; and evolved different cultures and civilizations.
- 4) Each has inherent precepts of greatness and grandeur; of outstanding moral, philosophical, social, economic and yes, military achievements.
- 5) Yet, each has also seen periods of darkness of internal and external intolerance and repression and close mindedness. Fortunately, throughout history, periods of darkness in the area populated by one faith and civilization, have coincided with enlightenment, intellectual freedom, tolerance and accommodation of others. This has enabled Mankind despite horrible wars and destruction – to maintain the thread of civilization; to rebuild; to progress on the basis of past discoveries, and experiences and achievements, often of other Civilizations and Faiths.

- 6) The basic tenets of all Faiths and Cultures are fundamentally similar: prescribing indivisible peace, dignity, honesty, equality, harmony, tolerance, cooperation, commitment, patience, fortitude. The differences reflected in Faiths affected the different circumstances of particular periods in history, in geography and in scientific and intellectual development. Faith enabled governments to act coherently and cohesively thus to maintain order, improve the human conditions and advance human civilizations.
- 7) The clash of Faiths and Cultures that occurred throughout history was, overlooking the particularity, provoked by competing political and/or economic motivations of groups, communities, tribes, kingdoms, empires and states. They did not arise, inherently, from the fundamental precepts of any religion. Yet, despite the catastrophic confrontations recorded by history, there were, in fact much longer periods of coexistence and even cooperation and exchanges between faiths, cultures and civilizations.
- 8) Today, however, mankind is facing an entirely different context.

Firstly, there is greater diversity, than ever, within each faith in its interpretation and proactive diversity manifested in different geographical locations but also within specific locations i.e. horizontal and vertical diversity. This diversity can be manifested in extreme forces, from militant and fundamental commitment to beliefs, to complete rejection of Faith as dogma and superstition. There are thus considerable tensions within each Faith and Culture.

Secondly, the phenomena of international migration, communications and information technology have in many ways, blurred the geographical and other fault lines where specific faiths and cultures encountered and inter-acted with each other. Today, the contact and inter-action of Faiths take place in the street, the work-place, the living room, on T.V. and the internet. This greater contact is a factor for accommodation and acceptance as well as friction and rejection.

Thirdly, these developments – loss of internal cohesion and escalation of external interaction – are taking place simultaneously with the rise of significant asymmetries – in wealth, power and privilege, where some faiths and cultures are perceived to enjoy greater privileges and unequal advantages as compared to others. This is the general perception between the peoples of the South and the North. Indeed, the perception of being disadvantaged and even deliberately

discriminated against, as a faith and culture, is the strongest within the general population in the Muslim World. As a result, there are two simultaneous frictions that are in play.

One, within the disadvantaged societies, where internal answers are being sought for economic and social backwardness and political and international failure. Very often, this internal questioning contributes to strengthening the more fundamentalist and even extremist forces in those societies.

Two, there is a rejection and resistance to the external civilizations which are seen to be the source of the socio-economic and political plight of the disadvantaged faith and culture. And, this resistance and rejection often produces a counter-reaction which can be equally intolerant and thus brutal.

9. The consequences of these phenomena are visible to all of us today - in their most extreme form is wanton terrorism that knows no borders in our contracting world.
10. The answers to these diverse and dangerous trends must be found through the dialogue such as the one we have initiated here today.
11. It is necessary to promote a better understanding of different faiths and cultures; to remove misunderstandings, and deliberately propagated negative caricatures. It is important to emphasize that the vast majority of the adherents of any faith are peaceful, tolerant, honest, just and caring people. Those who hold militant views are a small minority, and those who act on these militant views are even fewer.
12. At the same time, the socio-economic and political sources of this modern friction of cultures and faiths need to be addressed equally, vigorously i.e. ending underdevelopment and resolving outstanding mysteries.
13. All this can be achieved within the framework of the UN.

Let me finish by saying that we should not fear differences within or between societies, cultures, civilizations and religions but cherish them as a precious asset of humanity. We are all members of the same human family, with shared wishes and aspirations of a good and happy life in peace and prosperity. To see representatives of Governments, UN System Organizations and civil society gathered here today, united in their rich diversity, focused on one universal goal,

enhancing cooperation and mutual understanding, and ultimately to promote sustainable peace, is both inspiring and promising.

I wish you every success in this conference.

**Thank you.**