

Statement by Dr. Maleeha Lodhi, High Commissioner for Pakistan in London, on “Exploring Strategies to Enhance Interfaith Cooperation for Sustainable Peace” on June 22, 2005

Mr. Chairman,

Distinguished Secretary of Foreign Affairs of the Philippines,

Excellencies,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I must join in expressing my personal gratitude for this important initiative of the Philippines government which has been so enthusiastically supported by so many governments including my own as well as by the United Nations and Civil Society, as a historic tripartite initiative.

2. I have listened through a number of thoughtful and inspiring statements this morning including the message conveyed by Her Excellency the distinguished President of the Philippines.

3. The need to promote dialogue and cooperation among religions and cultures is no longer an option for our contracting world. It is a political as well as a moral imperative. The promotion of peace, security and prosperity at the dawn of the 21st Century depends more than ever before on the promotion of understanding, accommodation and cooperation among people of different faiths, cultures and backgrounds.

4. The greatest paradox in the world is that while it has brought people closer together and created vast networks of connectivity and inter-dependence, it has also spawned divisions and frictions among and within societies. Many of these divisions and frictions are manifested in religious tones and terms. In this post-Google world, the proliferation of the sources and the channels of information have, instead of promoting a better understanding among peoples, quite often reinforced stereotypes and deepened misperceptions. Despite the surfeit of information, instantly available, the gulf of misunderstanding among faiths and civilizations seems to have grown wider. There is both a “knowledge deficit” and “understanding deficit”.

5. Many would agree that the root causes of friction between cultures and civilizations are not primarily religious differences. The central message of all religions is almost identical. The root causes are often a clash of political and economic interests. Clearly, responses to conflicting political interests may be often be cast in religious terms but this is only an expedient disguise for those pursuing narrow political and national objectives.

Excellency,

6. There have been some commendable initiatives taken in the past to address this challenge. The UN’s Declaration for a Culture of Peace; the proposal of Iran for a Dialogue among Civilizations, Pakistan’s proposal for Enlightened Moderation; advanced by President Musharraf here at the United Nations more than a year ago; the Spanish proposal for Alliance of Civilizations; and this initiative of the Philippines to promote Interfaith Dialogue on a tripartite basis.

7. As a result of our discussion today, we have the opportunity to promote the maximum possible progress in advancing the goal of peace and harmony by capitalizing on the momentum generated by these convergent initiatives.

8. I fully agree with those who have emphasized the importance of inter-religious and interfaith dialogue. This must continue to involve – as today – governments, civil society and international organizations. It must secure the support of the entire international community and the leaders of the world as well as the people of the world.

9. Yet, we should be fully aware that dialogue alone is not enough. We need to leverage and tap the widespread desire for dialogue to translate this into concrete action and in tangible results that advance the objectives of peace and harmony and ameliorate the sufferings of those who are the victims of intolerance and interfaith friction.

10. What we should seek to promote is a comprehensive strategy for action at the international and national level. Such a strategy should be based on accepted principles and parameters:

Firstly, it should be promoted through dialogue and cooperation and eschew the option of coercion and intimidation;

Secondly, it should emanate largely from the internal decisions and motivation of governments and their peoples and not be externally imposed;

Thirdly, it should be comprehensive i.e. involve governments, civil society, private sector, media and international organizations; and

Fourthly, it should be supported by adequate financial resources from governments and the private sector.

11. The elements of such a strategy, of course, need wide debate and contributions from various sources. I would wish this afternoon to advance some elements which could be incorporated into such a strategy for action.

12. At the international level, such a strategy for interfaith harmony and cooperation should cover political, socio-economic, religious and cultural and institutional aspects.

13. At the political level, it is apparent that interfaith harmony and indeed justice and morality require the resolution of political injustice to which people are often subjected due to their faith or belief. The protection of religious minorities is a pervasive problem that exists in all societies both poor and rich. It is necessary to analyze the situation of religious minorities on a case-by-case basis and to develop thorough national and international plans to assist these communities in achieving their just and fundamental political, economic and social rights. In certain societies where migration has created a sudden mixture of faiths and culture, conscious processes for gradual and peaceful integration, co-existence and cooperation is necessary. A start could be made with the adoption of confidence-building measures that can overcome the hate and negative stereotypes that some have allowed to occur.

14. Similarly, and perhaps even more urgently, it is necessary to secure early resolution of conflicts and disputes where relations with different religions and faiths are directly involved. I have no hesitation in mentioning that such conflicts include Palestine and the Middle East, Kashmir and similar problems where Muslim peoples feel that they have been the objects of historical injustice. To this end, from the political negotiations which are taking place among the

parties concerned, it would be useful if interfaith dialogue were to lead to the creation of contact groups, with a similar tripartite structure on major political issues.

15. In the context of promoting economic and social development, the international community needs to take a conscious decision to extend development support to societies which are challenged by the problems of interfaith friction or extremism. Such development support should include helping poverty eradication and generation of economic growth through financial assistance and trade opportunities. The promotion of human development, good governance and support for popular participation in national affairs are other ways in which such challenging societies could be supported re-establishing harmony, peace and prosperity.

16. Action is also required in the context of cultural and religious affairs. To this end our dialogue should include religious leaders and scholars from across faiths and cultures even those who hold extreme views and are at present un-enlightened about the virtues of engagement with other faiths and cultures.

17. We should also consider a number of institutional actions to advance our objectives. These could include:

(i) the establishment of a Commission on Eminent Persons by the UN Secretary-General to promote interfaith cooperation. A proposal is already under consideration in response to Spain's initiative for an Alliance of Civilizations;

(ii) such a Commission should be accompanied by the creation of an Office for Interfaith Cooperation at the United Nations. I trust that adequate funding would be available for this worthy purpose;

(iii) we should consider the establishment of a common school for training of nationals, officials and diplomats from nations representing different faiths, e.g. in Middle East and South Asia;

(iv) scientific institutions could be set up for joint research with the participation of scientists from across the interfaith alliance such as from the Arab and Islamic world and the West.

18. International action should be accompanied by action at the national level. Solutions for the promotion of tolerance and a culture of peace will have to be country specific and respond to particular national situations. National actions could include the following:

First, conscious action to counter extremism within societies. Each government and people would need to promote their own special solutions to address such manifestations at the national levels;

Second, the promotion of domestic discussion among various religious groups and sub-groups with a view to promoting reconciliation and harmony among faiths and different strands of religious beliefs;

Third, conscious policy measures for the protection of rights of religious minorities and the promotion of their full integration into the national mainstream;

Fourth, policies to redress the social and human resource deficit in many "challenged" societies through poverty eradication, education and appropriate curricula, promotion of skills etc;

Fifth, strategies for economic growth, trade and job creation in particular steering young away from the politics of desperation.

Sixth, the creation of a corps of national volunteers for interfaith cooperation within and across national boundaries; and

Seventh, the involvement of civil society groups to engage in the promotion of interfaith cooperation and dialogue.

19. I trust that some of these suggestions for an action strategy will find reflection in the concluding document of this Conference.