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OSCE TOLERANCE IMPLEMENTATION MEETING ON PROMOTING INTER-RELIGIOUS AND INTER-ETHNIC UNDERSTANDING

Almaty, 12 and 13 June 2006

Statement by Dr. Mohamed Charfi, Member of the High-Level Group of the Alliance of Civilizations Initiative, at Session III

In August 2005, the Secretary-General of the United Nations established what he called "The High-Level Group", which is in fact a committee of 20 experts from different cultures belonging to different religions and countries, its task being to prepare a report on means of promoting the Alliance of Civilizations initiative. The idea of setting up such a project had been proposed by, the Prime Minister of Spain. Subsequently the Prime Minister of Turkey, associated himself with the project and the General Assembly of the United Nations adopted it, asking the Secretary-General to prepare an appropriate plan of action for this purpose.

The work of the High-Level Group was initiated by the two Prime Ministers concerned, subsequently regarded as the co-authors of the project, in Mallorca at the end of November 2005. It was then taken further at Doha, capital of Qatar, and then at Dakar at the end of May last year. There will probably be a meeting in New York as well and it is expected that the work will be brought to a conclusion in November 2006, by the adoption of a final report.

I would like to first thank the OSCE Secretary General Jean Marc Perrin de Brichambaut, for being in Dakar and contributing to the work of the High Level Group. We await the OSCE contribution to the Alliance of Civilizations Initiative with great interest at the end of this month. If you permit, I will come back on that later.

Ladies and gentlemen, the idea of the Alliance is a valorous idea and a particularly opportune initiative, especially at the present time when we are experiencing difficulties and even tensions in relations between the West and the Muslim world.

We are familiar with the theory of the clash of civilizations put forward by the writer Samuel Huntington, which gave rise to a vast debate. The conflict between Islam and the West was inescapable, he claimed, and would in effect take over from the old Cold War. Unfortunately the spectacular and dramatic events of 11 September, the criminal acts perpetrated in the Paris metro, at the railway station in Madrid and in the London underground, to mention only the most familiar among them, cost thousands of innocent civilians their lives and seemed to confirm the theory, thus rendering the problem even more serious and urgent.

The High-Level Group of the Alliance of Civilizations is unanimous in believing that the dialogue between religions which was launched several years ago and is being carried out in different forums must be turned into a more profound discussion, so that, along with other initiatives, we will be able to work effectively in favour of the Alliance of Civilizations.

There are, to be sure, many difficulties. For more than a thousand years history has been marked by wars and violence of various kinds. Fortunately, between the crescent and the cross there have been many contacts marked by fruitful co-operation and mutual enrichment, but acts of hostility between East and West have also been numerous. In particular, memories of colonization and the sufferings endured in the battles for independence are still very much alive. Let us not forget that a vast majority of Muslim peoples have been dominated by Christian powers. Today the independent Islamic States have turned the page and officially adopted a policy of peace and co-operation, in particular with Europe. The essential question that arises is the following: have we actually attained the objective of peace in the hearts of men? Obviously the reply is: not yet. To do that we need to combat extremism by all the means available to us.

Every civilization corresponds to a culture which, essentially, is based on religion. Now as it happens, each religion, at all events each of the three monotheistic religions, has given rise to many different interpretations. The spectrum of interpretations is in fact very broad, and we find in it two extremes. The most impassioned true debate is not so much the one that pits the different religions against each other but rather the one which places divergent options within a given religion in opposition to each other.

Within Christianity we are familiar with the range of theological thought that served as a basis for the crusades which turned the Middle East into a bloody battlefield for two centuries; yet on the other hand the option of dialogue between religions is today being extolled by Vatican II.

Judaism produced Yitzhak Rabin, a man who courageously came out in favour of peace with the Palestinian people and concluded the Oslo Accords. But Judaism has produced its own extremists, among them notably Amir, who was the murderer of Rabin. Hinduism produced that great man Mahatma Gandhi but also the extremist who assassinated him.

Within Islam there are many trends calling for peace and harmony among all human beings, notably the doctrines of the Sufis. In the Middle Ages, the great Halladj sacrificed himself, accepting execution out of his love of others. At the other extreme, today, Bin Laden and his partisans are committing their crimes in the name of Islam. We should add, moreover, that those who suffer most from the violence committed in the name of Islam are the Muslims themselves. The violence committed against them in Muslim countries is particularly prevalent and murderous. The civil war which pitted Islamists and moderate Muslims against each other in Algeria resulted in about 200,000 victims.

Action on behalf of the Alliance of Civilizations is intended to be based on liberal interpretations and doctrines of harmony between peoples such as are reflected in different cultures, the aim being to propagate these on the scale of humanity as a whole by all appropriate means. The report of the High-Level Group now being prepared will propose three priority areas in which action should be taken: education, other means of gaining access

to young people, and the media. The report will also contain a political section and possibly also a theological one.

The political section

Muslims preserve in their memory the sufferings of the colonial period and feel that this has not yet come to an end. They believe that this is the fault of the West because the consequences of the colonial period exist in two zones.

In the first place, the Palestinian drama has gone on now for scores of years. The Palestinians are today the last people still to be deprived of their right to self-determination, their right to build a State on at least a part of their territory. To be sure, this is a complex problem, and no one denies it. We all know that Europe has been endeavouring to compensate the Jews for their fate as victims of the Shoah. But the Palestinian people themselves have been suffering for 60 years and it is time to find an equitable solution for them.

Then came the occupation of Iraq which has, in the last few years, been added to this drama. The pretext used for the invasion of this country was the supposed existence of weapons of mass destruction and the presence of elements of al-Qaida. The result, now familiar to us all, is that not a single trace of weapons of mass destruction was found and that al-Qaida — which had not shown itself in the country up until then — has now found a reason to take action of its own. Furthermore, the State of Iraq is now destroyed and facing the daunting task of reconstruction.

As far as Islamic public opinion is concerned, in all two cases the people affected are Muslims who are being oppressed. We need to have in our minds' eye the pictures presented on television every evening which show how various people are being killed — people, that is Muslims oppressed by Westerners. I know very well that al-Qaida was not born out of these three problems. Nevertheless, the violence being committed finds an echo in large parts of the Muslim world and plays into the hands of the extremists. Appropriate solutions must be found in the very near future to these three problems if we are to put an end to these tensions between Muslims and non-Muslims and eventually approach our goal which, along with an official peace, means peace in the hearts of men.

The final report could therefore contain an appeal to the West to multiply its efforts in this regard. I believe one could also address an appeal to Muslims — an appeal concerning the problem of Jihad.

The jihad problem

Muslim perpetrators of violence take their inspiration from the jihad. They believe they are carrying out a religious duty or at least performing a good deed in the religious sense. Each time a terrorist attack is committed in the West, the following day the mufti of some Muslim country or the leader of an Islamic movement styling itself as moderate can be heard denouncing the violence that has taken place and maintaining that the act committed constitutes a crime that cannot be described as Islamic jihad. Non-Muslims have some reason to be confused by these conflicts and rightly ask their Muslim partners to clarify the matter.

In the Islamic world, especially among the Sunnis who are in the majority, there is no definite institution like a church, clergy or pope authorized to formulate doctrine. Historically, the different rites were established by theologians who, through their piety and through their knowledge, had acquired such prestige that they managed to assert themselves as founders of schools. Their doctrinal works and those of their followers constitute Muslim law. Today this law poses a problem.

The Muslim people are undergoing a period of great change. State structures, customs, the family, the status of women and law are changing. With the exception of the States adhering to radical Islamism (Iran and Sudan) and traditional Islamism (the Gulf monarchies), all the other Muslim States are in the process of evolving their law; the law is no longer to be sought in the works of theologians; it is the work of parliaments¹ which legislate in the name of popular sovereignty; corporal punishment has vanished, banks offer loans subject to interest... . The States that have completed this evolutionary process make up four fifths of the member States of the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC), in other words a very large majority of States and peoples.

However, these changes were introduced by governments, that is to say by political men, do not have a religious basis. The theologians neither prepared nor accompanied these political and social reforms. Changes in Islamic thinking are slow. Muslim law is in need of modernization which it is still awaiting. Because of this failure to modernize, extremist movements contest the legitimacy of the regimes and challenge the reforms adopted. That is the way jihad works.

There are various interpretations of jihad. Many verses of the Koran tackle this subject and they are sometimes difficult to understand. They accompanied the Prophet in the last decade of his of his life, the Medina period marked by the hostility of those from Mecca who fought him and against whom he defended himself. Among these verses, let us cite No. 86 of sura II, The Cow: "And fight in the path of Allah against those who fight against you, but do not commit an injustice by being the first to attack, for Allah does not love those who are unjust".² One can therefore speak of a holy war only if it is defensive. But the trials and tribulations of history were such that, during the first centuries of the Hegira, wars of conquest were described as jihad. The holy wars in the Islamic world, like the crusades of Christianity or the numerous wars of the Jews recounted in the Bible, are historical facts that are described as religious events. It was a form of legitimization. And then, over time, the concept became obsolete.

But there has not been a clear and formal abolition declared by a religious authority. In some respects this is the missing link. Here is the source of ambiguity. Jihad continues to feature in religious books, is often taught in schools and referred to in sermons at the mosque. All this stems from the fact that the current evolution in Islamic thinking has been the work of politicians and has not been explicitly approved by religious figures.

This situation will continue until such a time as an assembly of renowned and credible theologians, bringing together representatives of the different leanings and all the academic

¹ Parliaments are sometimes poorly elected, but that is another story.

² Translation into French by Kasimirski.

institutions and Islamic universities, officially declares to the world that jihad has played its role in the past but that, modern-day international relations being such as they are, no one any longer has the right to invoke jihad as a holy war.

This is clearly a question that can only be settled by Muslims. Even so, non-Muslims have good reason to express an opinion on an issue that is of the utmost concern to international peace.

One can imagine that an appeal might be made to the international Islamic conscience in favour of such an assembly being held. One could also imagine the possibility of the United Nations attempting to facilitate, in co-operation with the Organization of the Islamic Conference, the holding of such an assembly. This would be an extremely happy event for fruitful relations between Muslims and non-Muslims. This proposal has been made within the High-Level Group. It has not been accepted for the time being. But it could still be discussed.

Similarly, but in another context, we can as well imagine that a call will be launched to the OSCE on the basis of its contribution, expected to be handed over in June, as announced by his Excellency Senator Chevalier that we will study with great interest. Last, I would like to thank the Belgian Presidency and the Authorities of Kazakhstan, especially Mr. Rakhat Aliyev for his hospitality.