



INDIA
भारत

Please check against delivery

STATEMENT

BY

H.E. MR. E. AHAMED
MINISTER OF STATE FOR EXTERNAL AFFAIRS OF INDIA

ON

INTER-FAITH DIALOGUE
UNDER AGENDA ITEM NO. 45
“CULTURE OF PEACE”

AT

THE 63rd SESSION OF THE
UNITED NATIONS GENERAL ASSEMBLY

NEW YORK

NOVEMBER 12, 2008

Mr. President, Excellencies, Distinguished delegates

I am deeply honoured to represent India at this important meeting. India welcomes the initiative of Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques His Majesty the King of Saudi Arabia to promote a high level Inter-faith Dialogue. In the context of today's challenges, His Majesty's effort to spread understanding and goodwill amongst the peoples of the world is both very timely and highly commendable. It will enable us to better work together in a genuine partnership for a peaceful and equitable global order.

Mr. President,

Just as a genuine partnership is based upon better understanding, the foundations of such better understanding are built on goodwill, tolerance and receptivity to differing viewpoints. A true partnership derives from a willingness to engage with each other in a dialogue based upon equality and mutual respect.

In India, we strive in our daily lives in a million different ways to practice such a dialogue of equals. This is an indispensable part of the process of building our nation as a shared endeavour. Such a dialogue is more than merely a conversation over issues of importance: it lies at the very core of our national existence.

Mr. President,

For millennia, the Indian subcontinent has provided shelter to countless strands of religious and philosophical thought and it is very much part of our historical tradition to accept all religions and spiritual experiences as true and valid. India is the birthplace of Hinduism, Buddhism, the Sikh and Jain faiths, while the great teachings of Islam, Judaism, Christianity and Zoroastrianism, quickly found fertile ground on our shores. Today, every one of the world's major religions has a home in India, making it a nation of unparalleled diversity.

Thus, Islam has flourished in our subcontinent for over thirteen hundred years and modern day India has 150 million members of the *ummah*. Put another way, today approximately one in ten Muslims worldwide is an Indian. Christianity too came to our shores shortly after its birth in the holy lands. Indeed, the Christian tradition reached India well before it reached most other parts of the world. Similarly, the Jewish and Zoroastrian people have an ancient history of having freely and peacefully practiced their faith in India.

Mr. President,

Inter-religious and inter-cultural dialogue is not new to India. The first philosophical dialogue between India and the West goes back to the time of ancient Greece. As Islam found a home in India, it too became part of the dialogue of our civilization. From this dialogue came new philosophic ideas, as well as an entire structure of Indo-Islamic culture. This culture is not only represented in the historical record of the art and architecture of our subcontinent, it also flourishes today in numerous spheres. The quest for a dialogue was also to find an echo in the life and works of the father of our nation, Mahatma Gandhi, who viewed receptivity to other cultures and traditions as a source of strength and cohesion for any society. To quote the Mahatma, "I do not want my house to be walled in on all sides and my windows to be stuffed. I want the cultures of all the lands to be blown about my house as freely as possible".

Mr. President,

The historical tradition of dialogue in India has drawn upon respect for knowledge, a willingness to question, as well as a desire to learn. Thus, for instance, the Buddha urged his followers not to accept his beliefs without questioning them. This philosophic tradition of questioning ideas is based on our recognition of the consequences of allowing belief to become blind faith. It finds expression even in the Indian Constitution, which declares our nation to be a secular republic and simultaneously underlines both the freedom of religion and faith, as well as the duty of the State to inculcate a scientific temper among the people.

While faith and belief sustain us in our search for answers to existential questions, in our daily lives, we also recognize the importance of science and a scientific temper, rational and liberal social practices and economic growth and productivity, to help us improve the lives of our people. It is for this reason that newly-independent India valued factories and universities as much as it did its places of worship, seeing them as the temples of modern India.

Mr. President,

The State that I hail from in India, Kerala, is an outstanding example of the tradition of promoting dialogue and understanding that is to be found in my country. Through the ages, Kerala has witnessed the peaceful co-mingling of different cultures and religions. Kerala was the state where Arab Muslim traders first arrived as messengers of the Islamic faith. The village of Methala, near the city of Cranganore in Kerala, hosts the first mosque to be built in the Indian subcontinent, the Cheraman Juma Masjid. It was constructed around

AD 629, during the lifetime of the Holy Prophet [Peace Be Upon Him]. Our history also records that in AD 52, St Thomas, one of the thirteen apostles of Christ, brought Christianity to Kerala, landing on its shores in a ship owned by a Jewish merchant. The ship docked at a port which was home to a large trading settlement of Jewish and other people, including from Rome, Syria, and elsewhere. Indeed, it is in Kerala too that the Jewish people built what is now one of the oldest synagogues in the world. Today, the population of Kerala is almost equally divided amongst Hindus, Muslims and Christians.

Mr. President,

Dialogue amongst different cultures and religions is also important because it is precisely in the absence of such dialogue and understanding, that intolerance, bigotry and violence flourish. This is one reason why extremist ideologies, violence and terrorism, have grown in a world in which we seem to be moving away from dialogue and understanding. There can be no disputing that terrorism, which is a manifestation of extremism, intolerance and violence, is the antithesis of all religions. All acts of extremism and intolerance run counter to the central teachings of any religion, as all faiths are based on the universal values of peace, goodness and humanity. No religion condones violence or the killing of human beings.

In India, we are disturbed by the rise of intolerance worldwide. We are troubled by the increase in resources, financial and otherwise, that are being made available to violent and intolerant groups that misuse religion to justify and propagate their extremist agendas. The effort to counter such tendencies diverts attention and much-needed resources from development efforts in a country like ours. Moreover, the destructive activities of such groups can have potentially serious consequences to social stability, peace and tranquility.

It is therefore increasingly urgent that the nations of the world come together to tackle such evils. Modern societies cannot and should not tolerate extremism and violence. Those who consciously or unconsciously abet extremism and terrorism would be well served to remember that these are monsters that may not easily go away.

Mr. President,

We need to send out a clear message emphasizing the importance of tolerance for the faiths and beliefs of others. The UN Charter states that the peoples of the United Nations are determined to practice tolerance and live together in peace. We need to emphasize the responsibility of member states to do all in their power to promote tolerance and respect. Eventually, however, we will need to build a larger platform based upon tolerance, which stresses

the fundamental equality of all cultural traditions, religions and faiths, and the essential truth that all human beings are equal before their creator. The world is home to such a diversity of faith and culture that proactive dialogue-based initiatives are essential to ensure better understanding between peoples. Such dialogues should expand mutual comprehension and reduce misunderstandings and misgivings; indeed, they should aim to celebrate the infinite diversity that makes up our world.

Mr President,

I would like to conclude with a quotation from the revered saint and social reformer of Kerala, Sri Narayana Guru. In a message to an All Religions Conference held in 1924, he stated that: "This great Parliament of religions makes it abundantly clear that the ultimate goal of all religions is the same, so there is no need for followers of different religions to indulge in mutual conflict."

Thank you, Mr. President.