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Statement by

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President of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan**

in

**the Plenary Meeting
Under Agenda Item-45:
“Culture of Peace”**

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Asif Ali Zardari
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United Nations Interfaith Dialogue
New York City
November 13, 2008

Mr. President,
Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon,
Your Majesty Khadim-e-Harmain Sharifain
King Abdullah Bin Abdul Aziz Al-Saud,
Your Royal Highnesses
Excellencies

Assalam-O-Alaikum – May Peace Be upon You.

We stand at a critical cross-road as we gather in this great hall of the nations.

We have the opportunity to start afresh and rebuild a better world for our children to prosper.

Yet we still confront a dangerous world of confrontation and terror, threatening to provoke the "clash of civilizations" that this Dialogue was instituted to prevent.

There remain those in this world who thrive in chaos, drawing power by putting

----Thought against thought;

---- Faith against faith;

---- People against people!

This was surely not the world man was gifted by our God.

For the children of Ibrahim, the world was meant to be the meeting ground of civilizations, of ideas and of human dignity.

As the elected representative of 180 million Pakistanis --- suffering from this menace of hatred --- I reject those who would divide us and rally around those who would unite us as creations of the one and only God.

I take this inspiration from my elder brother ---- a man of wisdom and a man of action, the Custodian of Harmain Sharifain, His Majesty King Abdullah Bin Abdul Aziz Al-Saud.

I commend and congratulate you, Your Majesty, for having the courage and the vision to convene this meeting on interfaith dialogue.

Many men talk change. You cause it.

In taking this initiative, Your Majesty has, in fact, revived the great Islamic tradition of reconciliation and inclusion.

And I find this worthy act stemming out of Your Majesty's wisdom that is leading your great country today on the path of progress while following the fundamentals of our religion.

On one hand, it is this wisdom that has guided the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia to build its first modern University for women, which is designed to be world's largest female Centre of higher education.

This may surely be considered as a historic milestone for women empowerment in the Kingdom and the Muslim World.

On the other, His Majesty is the First Saudi leader to have travelled to the Vatican, hence opening dialogue between the two largest religions of our times.

His Majesty effectively laid the foundations for bringing followers of different religions and beliefs closer to one another at the Madrid Conference.

As His Majesty's tireless efforts yield results and a galaxy of world leaders gather here today because of His Majesty's initiatives, it is important for me to recognize and acknowledge his noble contribution towards the cause of human unity and dignity.

Thank you for all that you have done for us, Your Majesty!

Excellencies!

For me and for the nation of Pakistan, our participation today at this convocation represents more than just an honor.

For us, it is a personal opportunity to advance the message of a moderate, modern and loving Islam, which guided the work of our beloved leader, Shaheed Mohtarma Benazir Bhutto, who sacrificed her life for the cause of tolerance, dialogue and the avoidance of a clash of civilizations.

This message is a central element of the Madrid Declaration, and thus it is especially fitting that we join together with you today to continue the work for which she gave her life.

I come here as the representative of the 180 million people of a country that was created with deep ties to Islam but from the very first days, in the vision of our founder the Quaid-i-Azam, dedicated to the pluralism sanctified in the Holy Quran.

Islam is tolerant of other religions and cultures and internally tolerant of dissent. Allah tells us over and over again, through the Holy Quran, that He created people of different views and perspectives to see the world in different ways and that diversity is good. It is natural and part of God's plan.

The Quran's message is open to full participation of all people in the life of their societies and it encourages knowledge and scientific experimentation.

Islam is grounded in the past and reaches out to the future. And one of its central guiding principles is the reason we engage here today.

Islam accepts as a fundamental principle the fact that humans were created into different societies and religions and they will remain different.

In the words of the Holy book, "If your Lord had pleased He would certainly have made people a single nation, and they shall continue to differ."

Our world is home to people of many religions and creeds. And, they are ALL worthy of respect.

All of God's creations deserve a better life where their basic rights of food, education, shelter and the protection of their families is guaranteed.

Above all, it is their basic dignity as human beings that must be universally recognized and respected.

In his last sermon on the occasion of his last Hajj, the Holy Prophet of Islam -- May Peace Be Upon Him -- said, and I quote: "You are all children of Adam, and Adam was created from clay. You are all equal."

Throughout recorded history, the enemies of peace have often invoked faith as an instrument of creating disunity.

King Abdullah, in his wisdom, has decried those that would use religion to advance a rigid and extremist political agenda.

He has said that religion must be a bridge bringing nations together, not a wall keeping nations apart. It is therefore critical that we undertake the task of building upon faith as a means of finding common ground between different nations and civilizations.

It was this principle that caused Pakistan and the Philippines to have been the original co-sponsors of the General Assembly Resolution on “Promotion of Inter-Religious and Inter-Cultural Dialogue, Understanding and Cooperation for Peace.”

So as we gather here to move forward toward these ends, let us not talk of what divides us, but rather what unites us as the creation of the same God.

I come from a country where the struggle for Islamic principles of gender equality, tolerance and reconciliation has brought us to the center of on the international stage.

It is a measure of this struggle that the first woman ever elected Prime Minister of a Muslim country was from Pakistan.

It is a measure of this struggle that twice my late wife and leader Shaheed Mohtarma Benazir Bhutto led the country as Prime Minister.

In following her footsteps, we made a woman, Speaker of the Parliament, again for the first time anywhere in the Muslim world.

And in coming generations, Insha’Allah, we hope to have a woman as President and head of State.

Excellencies!

In following the true spirit of Islam the great leader of my country Shaheed Mohtarma Benazir Bhutto fought and laid down her life advocating dialogue and tolerance and opposing extremism.

Indeed the last act of our great leader was to write a book entitled “Reconciliation” that was published after her assassination.

In it she rejected the so called clash of civilizations as an attempt “to twist the values of a great and noble religion”.

In her last words, in this book which is her political legacy, she lays out a political vision of reconciliation that must guide us in the days and years ahead.

These views are the guiding principles of the newly elected democratic government of Pakistan. Her example continues to lead us today, not just only in Pakistan, but in every corner of the world. In her honor:

Let us unite to recreate a world of tolerance and an end to bigotry.

Let us unite to create a world of understanding and respect.

Let us unite to build a world of peace and stability.

Let us unite to create the world of “reconciliation” for which she died.

Excellencies!

To me, there is nothing more un-Islamic than discrimination.

There is nothing more un-Islamic than violence against women.

And above all, there is nothing more un-Islamic than terrorism – the killing of innocent men, women and children, a crime expressly prohibited in the text of the Holy Book itself.

Excellencies!

Unfortunately at a time when most Muslims are advocating interfaith dialogue they also witness events that frustrate our call for dialogue.

We hear hate speeches across countries and regions in which Islam as a religion is attacked.

Hate speech against Islam also leads to injustices against Muslims.

Indeed the imaginary fear of Islam has been rising. This is exactly what the terrorists had hoped to provoke. Those in the West that accept this are falling into the trap of the terrorists.

This imaginary fear of our religion has created a new form of discrimination and is giving rise to new tensions.

Let us translate the dynamic messages of our respective religions for the good of humanity and not to create strife.

Let us turn the messages of hope imbedded in our faiths into living and practical reality.

To this end, I propose consensus on an international agenda wherein:

----- Hate speech aimed at inciting people against any religion must be unacceptable.

----- Injustice and discrimination on the mere basis of one's faith must be discouraged --- not only in words but through meaningful actions!

-----Bigotry manifested in Islamo-phobia and anti-Semitism must be combated.

---- Dialogue, and not discord, between civilizations and faiths must be encouraged.

----- Nations with little resources caught in the crossfire of extremism should be helped, strengthened and aided by the international community.

Let us not isolate people; let us engage people.

Violence is an act of desperation.

Let us commit ourselves to eliminate the root causes of extremism and terrorism, giving all people in all societies renewed faith in their countries, in their laws, and in the futures of their children.

Let us hit the causes of the terrorist menace, not condemn its innocent victims.

Excellencies!

To us, Islam is about social justice and emancipation of men and women. As such we reach out to all of God's creations.

Islam is about serving the Muslim masses by ending poverty and backwardness and building peace and tolerance. As such we reach out to all of God's creations.

Islam is opening the doors of knowledge for each and every citizen. As such we reach out to all of God's creations.

Excellencies:

We must also commit resources to dialogue and international cultural understanding.

In Pakistan, we have already created the Benazir Democracy Institute. We have created the Shaheed Benazir Bhutto Foundation to expressly promote and encourage dialogue, inclusion and exchange.

We should be encouraging the successor generation -- those who will lead after us -- to use education and exchange not only to adapt to modernity, but to use modernity and technology to change the world.

Educating the nation's youth and international exchanges of students, scholars and intellectuals is part of our dream of reconciliation.

On occasion of this meeting we dedicate ourselves to this dream.

We do this for the children of our children.

We do this for a better tomorrow.

And we do this to leave behind a world better than the one we found.

This meeting on inter-faith dialogue must be the beginning of a new journey for our nations, in the immortal word of my beloved wife, a journey of "reconciliation."

Thank you – and May God be with all of you