**PERMANENT MISSION OF SINGAPORE
TO THE UNITED NATIONS**

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**STATEMENT BY AMBASSADOR VANU GOPALA MENON,
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TO THE UNITED NATIONS,
AT THE HIGH-LEVEL PLENARY MEETING
ON CULTURE OF PEACE
[AGENDA ITEM 45]
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1   Globalisation has connected us all together more closely than ever before. All over the world, people of different religions now live and work together in mixed societies. Diversity is a byword, both religiously and culturally, which in turn raises important questions about how these religions and cultures can and should interact. We should consider ways to facilitate dialogue because the map of the world should never be colour-coded based on our different religious identities.

2   In this regard, inter-religious dialogue has become an important way for people of different religions to engage one another and to build mutual trust and understanding. The roots of such dialogue can be traced back to the late 19th century when the World Parliament of Religions was held in the United States. The inter-religious movement has gathered momentum since and has become increasingly important and relevant in recent years.

3   Religion is a highly personal and spiritual matter. It can evoke the deepest responses and convictions of a person, to the extent that sometimes perceived differences become too hard to bridge. Therefore, it is understandable why some peoples and communities may not be comfortable with the idea of inter-religious dialogue and interaction. Although different religions may preach similar moral standards and values, differences between religions can be very real and distinct. However, in today's world where our lives are so deeply intertwined, we cannot afford to be ignorant of one another, or to have enmities between different religions and cultures. As we get to know one another better, we not only appreciate how others in different religious communities encounter the divine, but also enhance our understanding of our own religions. In the process, we hope to widen the common ground which we all share in the development of all societies.

4   Dialogue is clearly important as it seeks to engage individuals, to build relationships and to deepen mutual trust and understanding. However, to be effective in the promotion of inter-religious and inter-cultural sentiments, dialogue will have to be accompanied by action. Governments have an important role to play in this regard. Governments can and should initiate processes at the local level, to bring together key partners capable of establishing links between religious leaders, so as to emphasise the value of working together in harmony for mutual benefit. To do this sensitively and

meaningfully, we need to recognise the local realities of society, such as the trust that people have in their governments to be impartial in their dealings with different ethnic communities.

5   Singapore is a small island state with a population of about 4.84 million. Ethnic Chinese make up more than 75 percent of the population, Malays make up about 14 percent and Indians 9 percent. The rest of the population consists of Eurasians and other ethnic groups. Singapore is also a multi-religious country. While about 15 percent of the population has no religious affiliation, the majority of Singaporeans are followers of various faiths, including Christianity, Buddhism, Islam, Hinduism, Sikhism and the Bahá'í Faith, among others. Notwithstanding our diversity, race and religious relations in Singapore today are generally stable and strong, with a good level of inter-religious tolerance and respect. This is no mean feat, and is the result of the concerted efforts of the Singapore Government and its people over close to three decades. For example, in 1990, Singapore's Parliament passed the Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act, allowing the Government to restrain leaders and members of religious groups or institutions from carrying out any acts that could cause feelings of enmity, hatred, ill-will or hostility between different religious groups. A Presidential Council on Religious Harmony was also formed under the Act to advise the Government on matters affecting the maintenance of religious harmony in Singapore. In 2003, the Declaration of Religious Harmony was issued by the national bodies of all mainstream religious groups in Singapore to affirm the importance of and commitment towards religious harmony. The Inter-Religious Harmony Circle comprising religious representatives was subsequently formed to further enhance our efforts in the promotion of inter-religious harmony.

6   More recently in 2006, an overarching governmental effort to foster unity and resilience among various communities and religious groups was established. Called the Community Engagement Programme or CEP, the programme brought together stakeholders from community organisations, businesses, unions, media, educational institutions and religious organisations to take up the responsibility of building social resilience and communal harmony. A major achievement on this front was the establishment of the National Steering Committee on Racial and Religious Harmony, which brings together apex leaders of all major faith and ethnic organisations to dialogue and exchange views. Singapore society is also seeing more ground-up initiatives in the promotion of inter-religious dialogue. One such example is the Memorandum of Understanding signed by the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) and the Singapore Malay Youth Library Association in April 2006 so as to enhance interaction and understanding between Christian youths and their Muslim peers.

7   Efforts to promote dialogue are only one side of the coin. Singapore's approach towards communal harmony also comprises legislative measures against those who stir and provoke racial or religious intolerance. In this regard, the Singapore Government amended its Penal Code in 2007 to criminalise acts that promote enmity between different religious or racial groups, and are prejudicial to the maintenance of harmony in society. The Singapore Government has also shown that it will not hesitate to mete out what some might consider as harsh punishments to individuals or groups who commit

acts that promote feelings of ill-will and hostility between different races and religions. In 2005, three bloggers were sentenced under the Sedition Act for posting inflammatory racist comments about Malays and Muslims on their blogs. The conviction was necessary in order to send a strong message to all Singaporeans that such acts of promoting feelings of ill-will and hostility among different races and religious communities cannot be allowed and all offenders will be dealt with accordingly.

8   Singapore, of all countries, knows that peace and communal harmony are hard won. The lessons of the racial riots in the 1960s remain an indelible part of our history, just as the willingness of our people to embrace the diversity of ethnicities and religions continues to be passed on from generation to generation. This mutual understanding is something that we have come to accept and treasure in Singapore, in order to keep our small, multi-cultural society cohesive and harmonious.

9   We have also learnt that preserving the trust and understanding among different religious communities requires a spirit of give and take. And in respecting others, every religious group will be protected and assured of fair treatment in all aspects of life. This is an approach which is pragmatic and responsible, and has worked for Singapore, as it allows every section in the society to work together as partners for a common cause – to build an equal and harmonious society.

10   In this regard, my delegation is pleased to support the efforts spear-headed by the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia to bring about this plenary discussion on a "Culture of Peace". This initiative reaffirms the importance of promoting inter-religious dialogue as the way towards a peaceful coexistence among nations and peoples. My delegation also notes that the General Assembly would declare 2010 as the International Year for the Rapprochement of Cultures, and we pledge our support for the events that would be held in the course of the year that would further enhance efforts in this aspect.

11   Engaging in inter-religious and inter-cultural dialogue has never been more pertinent than in today's increasingly globalised world. Open and sustained dialogue, as well as the respect for the freedom of expression and religious beliefs are fundamental to our endeavour to promote a culture of peace. We have seen the emergence of various initiatives and mechanisms within the United Nations towards this end. The task at hand is to ensure the synergy of these efforts so that we can all stand on a common ground in promoting the development of human society and building a harmonious world.

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