

17 March 2010

**Statement of H.E. Mr. Ali Abdussalam Treki,
President of the 64th Session of the General Assembly,
at the Special Non-Aligned Movement Ministerial Meeting on
Interfaith Dialogue and Cooperation for Peace and Development**

Your Excellency Mrs. Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo, President of the Republic of the Philippines,
Your Excellency Dr. Mahmud Hamdi Zaquq, Minister of Waqf of the Arab Republic of Egypt,
Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen,

I would like to thank the Government of the Philippines for inviting me to join you today in this important meeting, which gathers the largest community of Nations outside the context of the United Nations. Today's meeting addresses one of the most important issues currently on the international agenda, particularly in view of the General Assembly resolution declaring 2010 as the International Year for the Rapprochement of Cultures, under the auspices of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization.

Promoting dialogue, understanding and coexistence between all races, religions, cultures and civilizations is key to building a multilateral international system based on mutual respect, reinforcing common interests, consolidating the concepts and principles of the peaceful coexistence between peoples, achieving peace and removing the roots of conflict and crisis.

Throughout its history, humanity has experienced tensions of varying intensity between cultures and religions. There have been times when some proclaimed the dominance of a single civilization and attempted to impose certain beliefs on all societies. There have been other instances when attempts were made to impose a paradigm of conflict and characterize a particular civilization or religion as the principal enemy, which all nations must band together, in order to defeat. All these attempts deny the fact that human advancement throughout the ages has been built on the accumulative achievements of earlier civilizations.

One can only pay tribute to the efforts and initiatives of those who firmly believe in the value of dialogue, understanding, moderation and mediation and who reject intolerance and extremism. Efforts without which the number of conflicts and wars would increase.

I would like to express my appreciation to the Philippines for highlighting the commonalities between peoples, faiths and civilizations, thanks to its vast experience in that regard. The Philippines is an example of how a country can create common interests and achieve harmony between its various cultures, languages, religions and faiths.

One of the most important issues that we must address, whether at the level of the Movement or at the international level at large, is the need to formulate practical and constructive measures aimed at increasing tolerance and understanding, and avoiding branding entire cultures and religions as hostile. But we cannot achieve this goal through dialogue alone. It is an important first step to generate enough international momentum in order to enable dialogue to prevail over conflict ...to enable collective action to prevail over unilateralism. We must ensure that people have the right to practice their religions and beliefs freely, without fear from extremism or the spectre of measures and legislations that curtail this freedom or discriminate against a particular religious group, in contradiction with States' obligations under international law and international human rights conventions. The answer lies in transforming our dialogue into national, regional, and international measures and policies aimed at achieving this noble goal.

Furthermore, we must not tolerate attacks on religions and beliefs or on their symbols, and must ensure that freedom of expression is not invoked in order to show contempt for religions.

I therefore commend the Final Document of this high-level meeting, which contains a clear programme of work and well-defined practical steps. Its full implementation would no doubt have a significant effect in creating the momentum we all wish to see.

In this context, and in line with the work of the General Assembly in this respect, I would like to inform you of my intention to hold a high-level thematic debate at the General Assembly in New York on 25 May 2010 on the dialogue among civilizations. This meeting will focus on how such dialogue can help foster international peace and security and resolve longstanding regional and international conflicts. It will complement the relevant General Assembly resolutions and the initiatives and activities of other various stakeholders, including the Alliance of Civilizations and the Global Agenda for Dialogue among Civilizations. I encourage you all to participate effectively in this important event, in order to uphold the values and principles of diversity and assert the role of the Assembly as the principal policymaking organ of the United Nations.

Far from causing a conflagration, dialogue and a deeper understanding between religions and cultures have a positive part to play in tackling the causes of ongoing and chronic conflicts. They should help foster peace and coexistence, thereby promoting sustainable development in a socially and economically stable environment. Developing societies face an array of challenges: the eradication of poverty and hunger, the current global economic and financial crisis, the threats posed by climate change, and several recent natural disasters. Confronting these and other challenges requires harmony between cultures, languages and religions, which are so abundant on one single earth. The international community should not be hampered by an artificial clash that pits the followers of different religions against one another on the basis of their convictions. The persistence of such challenges fuels tension and frustration between communities. Development is therefore closely interrelated with tolerance and the eradication of radicalism and extremism. I believe that this meeting attempts to address this challenge in a positive and practical manner, thereby furthering the goal of achieving global peace.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

What we are currently witnessing in Jerusalem, Hebron and Bethlehem is a glaring example of a conflict between an occupying power and a defenceless people, who bear the humanitarian, cultural and religious cost of the occupation. This is not a conflict of religions, cultures or civilizations, as some would have us believe. It is a political conflict, which makes itself evident in every aspect of life, a struggle between an occupier who is usurping the land and the true, legitimate owners of that land.

This important meeting should challenge any attempt to colour political conflicts with a religious veneer, thus attempting to obliterate one identity in favour of another. The international community must take a firm stand; it cannot remain silent, allowing humanitarian and religious violations to be obscured by double standards. The followers of all religions and faiths, without distinction, must enjoy the right to practice their convictions. No party can proclaim that its beliefs are superior to those of another.

I thank you and wish you every success.

May peace and the mercy and blessings of God be upon you.