

Organization of the Islamic Conference

“The OIC Inter-Institutional Forum on Universal Shared Values: Challenges and New Paradigms”

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Mr. Chairman, Excellencies,

Distinguished delegates, colleagues and friends

I am honored to join you, and to represent the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, on such an important day as the commemoration of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The OIC Inter-Institutional Forum on Universal Shared Values: Challenges and New Paradigms, convened today, has certainly re-affirmed our conviction that fundamental human rights can only be strengthened by all concerned working closer together. The United Nations and the Organization of the Islamic Conference have much in common in this regard.

We all know that all peoples share ethical values, such as compassion, generosity, dignity and selflessness. Belief in humanitarian values outweighs political and cultural differences. Humanitarianism is about acknowledging just this: our common humanity. It is a universal concept that applies to all people, at all times, irrespective of nationality, ethnicity, politics, religion or culture.

Just as all peoples share common values, they also share a common interest in providing the most efficient and effective assistance possible to those in need. This is where the importance of coordination comes in. The value of multilateral frameworks is in ensuring that donor

contributions have a maximum of impact in the struggle to save lives and alleviate suffering.

It is for this reason that I am so pleased that OCHA is working increasingly closely with the OIC on humanitarian issues. Plans indeed exist to see this collaboration further enhanced, both in regard to our becoming better acquainted with each other's instruments and methodologies, as well as in regard to specific areas of common concern, such as the Horn of Africa.

While today the focus has been on some of the normative aspects of human rights across countries and cultures, I would like to focus in the next few minutes on a more humanitarian perspective. While not wanting to paint a gloomy picture of the years to come, I think I should highlight what are acknowledged major challenges, challenges that will affect not only the poorest of the poor, but will have repercussions on us all. In short, these are the challenges of climate change (and worsening natural disasters), continuing conflicts, the food price crisis and lastly the financial/economic crisis.

The incidence and severity of natural disasters are likely to increase under the combined effects of climate change, population growth, inappropriate urbanization, and the risk of pandemics. In 2007, an estimated 134 million people suffered the effects of hurricanes, droughts, wildfires, and widespread flooding causing approximately US\$ 35 billion in damage. While global warming will create more intense and frequent hydrological disasters such as hurricanes and floods, urbanization will lead to larger numbers of people living in high risk settlements with no ability to withstand any type of sudden-onset disaster. The frequency of droughts has also increased and the geography of the world's deserts is also shifting, either as a result of human induced desertification or climate change.

Civil wars fueled by territorial disputes, resource scarcity, and other political, economic, social and ethnic factors will remain one of the most significant drivers of the humanitarian caseload. Conflicts over

resources are likely to continue and be exacerbated by – again – climate change and demographic trends.

According to WFP, the number of food emergencies has been rising over the past two decades, from an average of 15 per year during the 1980s to more than 30 per year since 2000. The latest UN data suggests that rising food prices are partly to blame for adding 75 million more people to the ranks of the world's hungry, lifting the global figure to well above 900 million people. The nutritional status in many affected communities is declining. Hunger and malnutrition is No.1 on the list of the world's top 10 health risks, killing more people than HIV/AIDS, malaria and tuberculosis combined. Each day, 25,000 people, among them more than 10,000 children, die from hunger and related causes.

Our preliminary analysis predicts that the ongoing Economic crisis will impact us in three main ways. First, it will certainly increase the total number of people needing humanitarian assistance around the world, particularly in countries where social safety nets are already tenuous. Second, we will inevitably see a tightening of the purse strings from the major traditional humanitarian donors. Third, the complexity of this financial crisis may well alter the very landscape in which we operate, while requiring us to find new ways to carry out similar levels of operations with less funding.

There is no guaranteed solution on how to tackle the multiple crises I have just referred to, but what is clear is that the humanitarian system needs to remain dynamic. At a recent brainstorming event that was hosted by the World Economic Forum, Under-Secretary-General John Holmes noted that there were four main areas to work on: policy reform, bridging the resource gap, strengthening partnerships and investing in prevention – both for conflicts and natural disasters. In the interest of time, I will limit myself to elaborating specifically on the partnerships element.

Although there is universal will for humanitarian action to be undertaken, the fact remains that there are too many actors and fundamentally not enough money. In such a scenario, only coordination can make sure that the resources that are available are indeed used in the

optimal manner. While OCHA seems to concentrate on coordinating the UN family, NGOs and the Red Cross Movement in international aid, it is steadily increasing its role as a facilitator of dialogue and collaboration with and between Governments and the private sector. In this case, reaching out to Governments can happen both bilaterally, regionally, or based on common values such as those represented by the charter of the OIC.

The role played by Muslim nations, and in particular, by Muslim NGOs, in the realm of humanitarian action cannot be under-estimated. OIC Member States, the Red Crescent Societies and other Muslim NGOs provide assistance to tens of millions of people in every corner of the globe. From Afghanistan to Somalia, Indonesia to Iraq, Niger to Pakistan, and beyond; these humanitarian efforts have made a life-saving difference, reaching communities that, at times, other aid actors have not been able to access.

As you are aware, humanitarian assistance is often and incorrectly so, perceived as principally a western effort. We consider that much greater international recognition should be given to Muslim NGOs, and OIC members, for the humanitarian assistance these organizations and countries provide. I would like to point out that greater participation in, and closer cooperation with, the multilateral effort could help attain that long-postponed but well-deserved recognition.

Mr. Chairman,

Let me take this opportunity to congratulate the OIC on the establishment of the OIC Secretariat's new International Cooperation and Humanitarian Affairs Department (ICHAD) in Jeddah. I look forward to OCHA having greater interaction with this Secretariat in the coming months and assisting in the elaboration of a training module, for ICHAD staff, to come to UN Headquarters, in New York and Geneva, to meet with humanitarian colleagues in these locations. Moreover, OCHA will remain in close contact, also with regard to providing the necessary support and information materials for meetings with the NGOs from

Islamic countries, both in the preparatory meeting and in subsequent meetings throughout the year. Finally, I am pleased to confirm that we are now in the final stages of formalizing the OIC and OCHA cooperation, with the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding, to take place in early 2009.

We truly look forward to working together, both better and more.
Thank you.