

## **Keynote Address of H.E OIC Secretary General at the Opening session of The OIC Inter-Institutional Forum on Universal Shared Values: Challenges & New Paradigms**

Mr. Chairman,  
Mr. Director General of the UN Office in Geneva;  
Madam Vice President of the Human Rights Council;  
Madam High Commissioner on Human Rights ;  
Excellencies; Honorable Invitees;  
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Let me begin by saying how pleased I am to welcome you all to this OIC-inter institutional Forum on Universal Shared Values: Challenges and New Paradigm, which is organized to commemorate and celebrate the 60th Anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

I would like at the outset to pay tribute to H. E. President Abdoulaye WADE, President of the Republic of Senegal, and Chairman of the OIC Summit for kindly providing his patronage and support.

Mr. Director General, let me also sincerely thank you and your staff for your valuable support and for the excellent facilities provided to us on this occasion.

I would also like to thank the High Commissioner on Human Rights and the Vice President of the Human Rights Council for being with us this morning.

In organizing this Forum, the objective of the OIC has been to give opportunity to all stakeholders from inter-governmental organizations, UN specialized agencies, government representatives and civil society institutions to make their own assessment on the implementation of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and submit appropriate solutions to address the new challenges that we face in promotion of human rights and cultural diversity.

The OIC sees the Universal Declaration more than a treaty. It is a powerful statement of common standards and shared values; an extension of the UN Charter; the basis for the International Bill of Human Rights; and part of the international customary law. It is remarkable that the Declaration generates political consensus, despite the ideological, religious, intellectual and the cultural diversity of the international community. It can thus be safely called the collective expression of human conscience. It has withstood the test of time and resisted attacks based on "relativism". The Declaration and its core values, including non-discrimination, equity, equality, and universality, apply to everyone, everywhere and always. Therefore, the UDHR belongs to all of us.

Islam, fourteen centuries ago, established an exemplary code for human rights. The major objective of this code is to confer on all human beings dignity and honour, and to eliminate injustice, oppression and exploitation. Human rights in Islam are firmly rooted in the equality among all mankind, transcending all considerations of place, colour, language and social status. These rights are part and parcel of the teaching of Islam that no ruler, government, assembly or authority can alter, curtail or violate in any way. Moreover, these rights go long way in line with the contemporary concept of human rights.

In recent times, the OIC member countries have made substantial contributions to the development of the Universal Declaration and the two International Covenants. The travaux preparatoire of these documents records valuable inputs given by the OIC member states on social justice, indivisibility of human rights, right to self-determination and religious freedom.

The OIC sees the Universal Declaration as a global metaphor connecting all humanity. It is a living document. Its full import needs to be invoked to face contemporary challenges, like the rising tide of incitement to religious hatred and discrimination and intolerance targeting Muslims. Attempts to equate Islam with terrorism should also be stopped. Stereotyping and demonization of Muslims should be combated.

The inherent negativity and stereotypical images disseminated are increasingly becoming source of grave concern to us and to all peace-loving circles in the world as these practices tend to incite hatred, discrimination and intolerance. While we emphasize the increasing trend of Islamophobia, we, at the same time offer our cooperation to address anti-Semitism, Christianophobia and anti-Western misperceptions as well.

By linking the crimes committed by a small fringe of misguided individuals with Islam and its teachings, these circles grant these criminals a premise, anchor and justification that they don't own or deserve, and encourage them to persevere in their objectionable deeds. In so doing, they do not help in combating terrorism.

Here I need to clarify the position of the OIC vis-à-vis the notion of "defamation of religions" which seems to create some misunderstanding and misinterpretations in some circles.

As far as Islam is concerned, our aim is not to protect religion against critics based on objective and rational interrogation. It is a fundamental principle in Islam for the believer to always question himself/herself, not only on the way he/she is practicing the Islamic teachings but also how to readapt to any practical circumstances and specific environments. What we are concerned about is the tendency of a new episode of extremist behavior against the adherents of a particular religion who are currently subjects of defamation, incitement to hatred, violence and racial discrimination.

This is not the only matter of national or local concern but it should be seen as a globalized phenomenon which needs to be addressed globally in an effective manner.

At the same time, the OIC is firmly committed to respect for freedom of expression which is a fundamental human rights. The OIC is not looking for limitation or restrictions of this freedom beyond those that already have been set by Articles 19 and 20 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

The line, the limit between criticism of religions and insult/incitement to hatred should be clarified. Each case should be taken up on its own merits. We have to be sure about what constitutes criticism but not incitement to hatred. For example, when somebody calls for burning of our holy book Qur'an, can it be considered as mere criticism? When the cemetery tombs of Muslim soldiers who fought for the flag of an European nation and sacrificed their lives are desecrated by extremists and racists, is it criticism of religion or an act of hatred and racism?

We believe that there is no freedom without responsibilities and accountabilities. To our regret, freedom of expression has been abused and exploited by some for obvious political, financial and other gains. What is needed is practical local and international mechanisms to address acts of incitement to religious or racial hatred which constitute a dangerous threat for the preservation of peace and harmony among communities. Combating ignorance and misunderstanding, promoting cross-cultural dialogue and exchanges, encouraging education on cultural diversity and mutual respect are some avenues to create and sustain a viable atmosphere of peaceful coexistence. We need to strengthen our efforts on this perspective. The OIC will continue to work with other international partners such as UNESCO, Alliance of Civilizations Secretariat, Council of Europe, OSCE and EU institutions in order to foster dialogue between the West and the Muslim World and to face challenges posed by misperceptions, stereotypes and misinformation.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen;

The OIC is going through a phase of introspection and soul searching on human rights. As the first

major step in this field, the OIC adopted in the year 2000, the Cairo Declaration of Human Rights in Islam (CDHRI). This Declaration was not conceived as an alternative to the Universal Declaration even though it additionally addresses religious and cultural specificity of the Muslim countries. The OIC has moved beyond the Cairo Declaration. In December 2005, OIC leaders at their Third Extraordinary Summit Conference in Makkah, Saudi Arabia unanimously declared that contemporary reform and development must be anchored in the principles of good governance, protection of human rights, social justice, transparency and accountability. The Summit outlined a Ten-Year Programme of Action with a road map for enhancement of human rights, for striving for enlargement of political participation and promotion of equality, civil liberties and social justice in the OIC member states. The new OIC Charter adopted during the last OIC Summit in Dakar, Senegal, in March 2008, called for the establishment of an independent permanent Commission to promote “the civil, political, social and economic rights enshrined in the organization’s covenants, the Cairo Declaration on Human Rights, and in universally agreed human rights instruments”. In accordance with these provisions, the OIC member states are also committed to strengthening their national laws and regulations to guarantee respect for human rights in their respected countries.

Excellencies, Ladies and gentlemen;

The 60th Anniversary of Universal Declaration of Human Rights is also coinciding with the birth of the United Nations Human Rights Council as a safeguarding mechanism for promoting and protecting all human rights based on the principles of universality, impartiality, objectivity and non-selectivity, constructive international dialogue and cooperation. The OIC attaches great importance to these fundamental principles and would like to see them fully adhered to in the working methods of the Council.

To this end, the OIC countries continue to remain committed to the spirit of interactive and constructive dialogue with the rest of the international community for the success of our new Council. Once again, I echo the core message of the OIC Council of Foreign Ministers Conference held in Baku, Azerbaijan in 2006, to the Human Rights Council, which underlined the following principles: (a) universality, objectivity and non-selectivity (b) cooperation and genuine dialogue to strengthen the capacity of states to comply with human rights obligations and (c) enhanced dialogue to broaden understanding among civilizations, cultures and religions.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen;

We welcome the current discussions of the Durban Review Conference and Working Group on the follow up to the Durban Conference. It should help strengthen its preparatory process which is long over due. The upcoming Durban Review Conference should provide us all an opportunity to discuss the contemporary scourge of racism as well as to suggest the most practical and efficient solutions to deal with them.

In its written contribution to the Preparatory process of Durban Review Conference, the OIC group in Geneva highlighted the daunting challenges to be overcome in this battle with reference to reports of a number of independent UN and EU experts including the European Monitoring Center for Racism and Xenophobia. Many obstacles should be vigorously addressed such as weak legislation and policies, lack of moral education and practical strategies, non implementation of international legal framework and commitment by some, persisting impunity on different ground such as freedom of expression, and sharp increase in the extreme right wing, xenophobic political platforms. The concrete proposals and recommendations provided by the OIC group in Geneva should be duly taken on board to address those challenges practically and efficiently.

The OIC had made it clear that the Durban Review process should not be a politically motivated process or an anti-Semitic exercise. It should be, on the contrary an inclusive process, where all stakeholders should be free to address the real and serious challenges of racism, racial discrimination and xenophobia.

I seize this opportunity to echo and support the call of the new High Commissioner on Human Rights for an active and positive participation of all stakeholders in the next year Durban Review Conference

in Geneva.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen;

While the international community is concluding a year long campaign of awareness in the context of celebrating the 60th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, we, in reality, have also mourned some of the failures of the international community, including the Human Rights Council in implementing its mandates and relevant resolutions for combating the systematic violations of basic rights of the Palestinian people during the last 45 years.

Since the inception of the Council, we have witnessed rejection to allow delegations to investigate the abuses in the Occupied Palestinian Territories. The Human Rights Council can not and should not be indifferent to this defiance while being called upon to take concrete measures for dealing with the systematic human rights abuses against Palestinian people and should devise new ways by which to ensure the protection of the basic human rights of the Palestinian people.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen;

When addressing human rights challenges, we should not neglect or underestimate the crucial socio-economic problems faced by the least developed and under-developed countries, such as extreme poverty, illiteracy, hunger, endemic diseases and lack of access to health care. All these challenges are being aggravated by the negative impact of cyclical environmental disturbances and climate change.

We should give full consideration to those developmental challenges which constitute serious obstacles in implementing the noble objectives of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. In this regard, I call for reinforcement of cooperation and better coordination of international efforts in order to provide sustainable solutions to those problems. From our part, within the new vision of our Organization enshrined in our new Charter and Ten Year Program of Action, we identified the above socio-economic challenges including women, child and family issues as priority areas for our joint action. Therefore, I am extremely happy that the second section of this forum is dedicated to development and humanitarian assistance issues during which we will be able to present information on the activities of our newly created Humanitarian Affairs Department.

Mr. Chairman,  
Mr. Director General;  
Madame Vice President of the Human Rights Council;  
Madame High Commissioner on Human Rights;  
Excellencies; Honorable Invitees.

Let me conclude by restating once again that we are in a defining moment in carrying out our share of responsibilities. A year long celebration for the 60th anniversary of Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the start of the new institution of Human Rights Council, give us ample opportunities to reevaluate the past performances and take concrete measures to protect and promote human rights for all and combat new manifestations of racism, discrimination and xenophobia. This is a global challenge which, like all other challenges, needs collective efforts to deal with. So let begin the long journey, supported by our belief in and conviction of the justice for all and with the help of our collective wisdom which had proven in the past to be the best guarantor of safeguarding human dignity and rights for all.

When we celebrate the 60th Anniversary, we should certainly be inspired by and cherish the impressive progress and success of humanity in the past 60 years, despite all the wars, aggressions, gross violations of human rights and crimes against humanity in many parts of the world which caused immense suffering for millions of people. Therefore it is our sincere hope that the future will witness less black stains in the record of human rights globally and the balance sheet will look more reflect more positive than today.

Myself, as the OIC Secretary General, would like to state in all sincerity that we will do our best to

uphold and defend for all, the lofty values of the Universal Declaration in cooperation with the international community.

Thank you all for your kind attention.

(Geneva, 19 December, 2008)