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**Organization of Islamic Conference
Inter-Institutional Forum on
Universal Shared Values: Challenges and New Paradigms**



**Statement of Ms. Navanethem Pillay
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Geneva, 19 December 2008

Mr. Chairman,

Mr. Secretary-General of the Organization of the Islamic
Conference,

Director General Sergei Ordzhonikidze,

Mr. President of the Human Rights Council,

Mr. Coordinator Zamir Akram,

Excellencies,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I welcome this opportunity to address the Organization of Islamic Conference Inter-Institutional Forum on Universal Shared Values: Challenges and New Paradigms and would like to thank the OIC for organizing this important event as a contribution to the 60th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The anniversary, celebrated all over the world, was a powerful reminder of what binds all of us: our common humanity, our inherent dignity and the expression of shared values.

Indeed, the Universal Declaration represented the first international agreement setting out freedoms, rights and entitlements for all humanity to claim. Emerging from the tragedy

of World War II, the Universal Declaration highlighted, as never before, the need for mutual understanding and collaboration, as well as the dangers of intolerance and divisiveness.

Six decades ago, it affirmed that the force of shared ideas and a common vision of respectful and peaceful coexistence can prevail over brutality, hatred and destruction. Since then, the world may have changed a great deal, but the recognition of our inherent kinship in rights, of our common claim to a life in dignity, of our right to count and be counted irrespective of our ancestry, gender and colour, status and faith applies to today's realities as much as it did in 1948.

And so does the Universal Declaration's emphasis on the inextricable relationship between fundamental freedoms and social justice, and the connection of both these elements with peace and security. By not ranking rights, the Declaration clearly expressed the equal status of political, civil, economic, social and cultural rights, as well as their interdependence. It envisaged a world in which every man, woman and child lives in dignity, free from hunger, violence and discrimination, and enjoys the benefits of housing, health care, education and opportunity.

It is this understanding of shared aspirations and values that prompted a majority of countries to absorb the Universal Declaration's principles in their constitutions and laws. Dedicated international, regional and national mechanisms have been put in place to be both the custodians and the monitors of human rights, their promotion and protection. Although diverse in methods and approaches, these mechanisms and institutions employ the human rights common platform to make the world a better, more just and safer place. A growing body of best practices in the implementation of the human rights standards that fleshed out the Declaration's principles is increasingly shared across national and regional divides.

This is because, irrespective of gender or culture, origin, religion or race, communal welfare hinges upon global respect and promotion of all rights, freedom and liberty, as well as economic, cultural and social rights

Despite all our advances in law and practice, and despite our increasing and a deepening understanding of the practical meaning of human rights, serious implementation gaps remain in protecting people from fear, injustice and inequality. There is no doubt that

repression, discrimination and poverty challenge us today just as they did the framers of the Universal Declaration. At the same time, daunting new challenges are emerging, such as climate change, the food and financial crises, globalization, terrorism, and new or resurgent epidemics. The sheer magnitude and the multifaceted aspects of the tasks ahead of us require collective efforts predicated on the common ground of our human condition and universal acceptance of the rule of law.

Yet doubts on the universality of rights continue to hamper international cooperation for the promotion and protection of human rights. Some critics maintain that the Declaration went too far in promoting the freedoms and values of liberal traditions. Others hold that its framers did not go far enough, and that liberty occupies a higher plane than material welfare. Yet such skepticism is more often expressed by duty-bearers than by rights-holders. While the promotion and implementation of human rights standards demand sensitivity to context, the universality of the essential values and aspirations embodied in these commitments are beyond doubt, as expressed in the Vienna Declaration which states and I quote:

“All human rights are universal, indivisible and interdependent and interrelated. The international community must treat human rights globally in a fair and equal manner, on the same footing, and with the same emphasis. While the significance of national and regional particularities and various historical, cultural and religious backgrounds must be borne in mind, it is the duty of States, regardless of their political, economic and cultural systems, to promote and protect all human rights and fundamental freedoms.” (Art.5. End quote)

My own personal experience has taught me that nothing is more important in the fight against repression and discrimination than the right to voice one’s values, opinions and criticisms, as well as the solidarity of those who, no matter how remote from our homes and plight, can help us in this fight. This is how resistance to authoritarianism and discrimination is built, cooperation and solidarity fostered, minorities protected and barriers to human rights removed.

In the era of globalization, ever-increasing migration and intersection of cultures, sharing experiences and educating others about one’s traditions foster a cross-fertilization of cultures. Crucially, it represents a compelling response to mounting

intolerance and discrimination. The wealth of diversity that we are fortunate to experience today should be seen as both a challenge and an opportunity to promote harmonious social interactions and human rights for everyone.

The truth is that the Universal Declaration was not merely congruent with some customs and foreign to other cultures. It drew its principles from many diverse traditions, and it made them more robust through a uniform codification.

Distinguished Participants,

OHCHR recently organised an expert seminar on the links between articles 19 and 20 of the ICCPR or between freedom of expression and advocacy of religious hatred that constitutes incitement to discrimination, hostility or violence. It is incumbent upon all to employ the spiritual basis for tolerance to promote understanding for diversity so that even contrasting views and convictions can be freely and respectfully expressed in the public arena. Expressions that amount to incitement to racial or religious hatred should be acted upon in an urgent but proportionate manner. However, speech critical of religions does not necessarily constitute such incitement. Each case should be assessed on its own circumstances and in accordance with all relevant international

human right standards, while stressing the importance of protecting the rights of both religious minorities and of non-believers alike.

Let me conclude by once again emphasizing that human rights are genuinely universal and deeply rooted in all civilizations and cultures. They are not the product and the exclusive preserve of specific doctrines and traditions. I would like to thank all participants for joining us in cherishing and upholding human rights as the product of our common aspirations and destiny.

I wish you a productive continuation of your session.

Thank you.