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STATEMENT

BY

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CONFERENCE**

**AGENDA ITEM 5 – PREVENTION OF
DISCRIMINATION : RACISM, RACIAL
DISCRIMINATION AND XENOPHOBIA**

**AT THE 57th SESSION OF THE
SUB-COMMISSION ON THE PROMOTION AND
PROTECTION OF HUMAN RIGHTS**

**Geneva,
August 8, 2005**

Mr. President,

I have the honour to make this statement on behalf of the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC).

Muslim countries are seriously concerned over the rise in Islamophobia in recent months. In April this year, the Commission on Human Rights in a resolution called for collective efforts to curb Islamophobia. Ironically, the tide of defamation of Islam has become even stronger since then.

OIC countries have strongly condemned terrorist attacks in London and Sharm Al Sheikh as despicable criminal acts. What is more, these attacks are repugnant to the tenets of Islam, a faith of peace, harmony and tolerance. Muslims abhor terrorism. Extremism is alien to the teachings and practices of Islam that emphasises moderation.

Yet the terrorist attacks have been used by vested interests to demonize Islam and Muslims. Greg Felton, a Canadian academic, has captured this phenomenon in the following way: "Any time the word 'Muslim' is mentioned in connection with an act of violence, you just have to recycle standard libels against Islam; chant the mantra of fighting 'the war on terrorism'; make unsubstantiated, disparaging assertions about 'Islamic terrorism'; [and] ratchet up the paranoia that makes civil repression possible".

Governments and world leaders have indeed chosen careful words in assigning blame for terrorist attacks. However, the media is often used to persecute and discriminate Muslims in Europe and North America. Instances of Islamophobia are beyond anecdotal evidence. They now form a pattern and forebode a major catastrophe ahead unless this trend is reversed through leadership.

We would like to share some disturbing trendlines with the Sub-Commission members:

- Tens of thousands of Muslim men, women and children have been subjected to verbal abuse, slurs, and hostility. In one European country alone, 1,200 suspected Islamophobic incidents have been recorded, out of which 269 fall into the category of "religious hate crimes".
- One Muslim was murdered allegedly on grounds of Islamophobia.
- Mosques have been attacked, vandalized and burnt.
- Racial profiling is increasing.
- Discrimination is spreading in work places, where in many instances Muslims are being called "terrorists". Businesses owned or run by Muslims are being targeted.

- A loud message is being given that Muslims are not welcome in their adoptive homelands. Citizens are being treated as aliens.
- Stray hate crimes or plain murders by Muslim criminals are being generalized to profile Muslim immigrant community in Europe and the United States. The killer of Theo van Gogh, the Dutch film maker, is painted as a mouthpiece of Europe's Muslim community.
- One lawmaker has proposed that Muslim holy sites in Mecca be "taken out" in retaliation for terrorist attacks.
- A report from British Scotland Yard published on August 4, 2005 confirmed "a startling surge in crimes related to religious hatred". Figures made public showed a 600% increase in faith-hate crimes since July 7, compared to the same period last year, largely affecting Muslim immigrants.

ASEAN Foreign Ministers in their recent meeting in Vientiane, Laos, have criticised stereotyping of Muslims as possible terrorists and complained that Muslims are being singled out in investigations into the attacks and also at the immigration checkpoints. A statement issued by the ASEAN Regional Forum said that terrorism constitutes a threat for all, irrespective of its origin, motivation or objectives. Australian Foreign Minister Alexander Downer has rightly said that wrath should be directed against "criminals and terrorists" not "Muslims".

Regrettably, this Sub-Commission has been subjected to abuse too. While states show restraint, some NGO representatives are packaging their crass propaganda as scholarly research in their bid to spread hatred against Muslims.

Jihad is being projected as a synonym for terrorism and extremism. The prefix of "Islamic" before terrorism is a sacrilege. Terrorist acts, says Abdul Cadar Asmal, "are antithetical to the fundamental principles of Islam and represent a heretical deviation of the religion". It has been suggested that the noble concept of Jihad for personal inner struggle and collective development of the society has, in fact, an inherent military correlate. This is distortion. The greatest Jihad is struggle with one's self, and an attempt to create a better, harmonious society. The lesser Jihad is military warfare when it is pursued in self-defence.

Text books in Muslim countries are being scrutinized minutely. This exercise is meant to banish germs of hatred. This ought to be done by the Muslim countries and they are doing so voluntarily and earnestly. At the same time, we must look closely at the text books in Western countries that project Islam as a religion of violence and revive images of holy wars dating back to the Medieval Ages to profile contemporary Muslim civilization. Critical scrutiny of Western text books is being blocked by forces that want to drive a wedge between Islam and Christianity and between Islam and other religions. We must persevere in this two-way dialogue on text books, without double standards.

Columnists, commentators and academics are sounding warning bells for West European governments that Muslims, because of their high birth rate as well as higher immigration numbers, would gain demographic dominance in Europe. This premise is used to advocate persecution of Muslims and to push amendments in laws to extern and expel them. Islamophobes are demanding that the European Union and the US should discard the policies of multiculturalism, tolerance, and dialogue between civilizations. London's Mayor, Ken Livingstone, in an article on July 30, wrote: "In particular there is now a sustained campaign to use the bombings to attack the advances we have made against racism in our society by blaming multiculturalism, diversity, immigration, and even the political correctness of the police."

If we read the trends closely and connect the dots, it is obvious Muslims are being "dehumanised". This is painfully reminiscent of the pre-World War II era. That dark chapter of history of persecution and pogroms must never be repeated.

The tendency to project Muslims as a monolithic extremist bloc, bent upon bringing the whole world under Islamic law, is both misleading and sinister. Paranoia is being spread that Muslims will strike roots in Europe, proselytise the whole continent to Islam and turn Europe into "Eurabia". The contributions of the majority of the Muslims in the United States and Europe are suppressed deliberately. As we know, millions of law abiding citizens are serving their communities as doctors, engineers, scientists, IT specialists, businessmen and academics. Some of them are now elected lawmakers and administrators. Islamophobes' real fear is the growing influence of these moderate Muslims, not terrorists and extremists.

Undeterred, we should:

- (a) Combat defamation of all religions, especially Islam, through promotion of education, awareness raising, and promulgation of laws prohibiting Islamophobia.
- (b) Prohibit dissemination of xenophobic and Islamophobic ideas and materials.
- (c) Prohibit discrimination on the basis of religion in work places and educational institutions.
- (d) Promote tolerance and respect for all religions and their value systems
- (e) Initiate and sustain a dialogue of civilizations to promote a culture of tolerance and peace

We welcome the initiative by the British Government to reach out to the Muslim communities across the UK to reassure them that they would not be discriminated. This is an exercise in bridge building. Immediately after the

terrorists attack, such outreach is necessary to blunt the weapons of terrorists who want to stoke the fires of hatred and resentment amongst different segments of societies. The guiding principle for our efforts should be that innocent people should not be punished for the crimes of the guilty.

Mr. President,

This is a contest between propagators of hate and proponents of peace. The majorities of Muslim and Western societies want coexistence, not conflict. Islamophobia is a recipe to pit neighbour against neighbour, country against country, civilization against civilization. We must not let this happen. Sub-Commission experts, as architects and interpreters of international law on human rights, should play their role to arrest this trend, including in the Sub-Commission itself. We must work together to devalue the currency of hatred and we must do so fast.

I thank you, Mr. President.